WILT THOU
TORCHY

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JEWELL FORD

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WILT THOU TORCHY

By SEWELL FORD

TORCHY

TRYING OUT TORCHY

ON WITH TORCHY

TORCHY, PRIVATE SEC.

WILT THOU TORCHY

ODD NUMBERS
"Shorty McCabe"

SHORTY McCABE ON
THE JOB

WILT THOU TORCHY

BY

SEWELL FORD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRANK SNAPP AND
ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

NEW YORK
EDWARD J. CLODE

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DEDICATION

To All Red Heads

and to those who, with me, have a generic liking, perhaps something stronger in specific instances, for these children of the sun. The Good Lord love 'em and keep 'em.

S. F.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	On the Way with Cyril	1
II.	Towing Cecil to a Smear	17
III.	Torchy Hands Out a Spill	34
IV.	How Ham Passed the Buck	51
V.	With Elmer Left In	70
VI.	A Balance for the Boss	87
VII.	Torchy Follows a Hunch	105
VIII.	Breaking Odd with Myra	126
IX.	Reporting Blank on Rupert	143
X.	When Auntie Crashes In	160
XI.	A Jolt from Old Hickory	179
XII.	Torchy Hits the High Seas	196
XIII.	When the Navy Horned In	213
XIV.	Auntie Takes a Night Off	233
XV.	Passing the Joke Buck	251
XVI.	Torchy Takes a Running Jump	272
XVII.	A Little Speed on the Home Stretch	292

ILLUSTRATIONS

"But the Impudence of You, to Do It Right Here!" She Goes On. "No One but You, Torchy, Would Have Thought of That" . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"'I Refer,' Says Cyril, 'to the Brotherhood of the Sacred Owls.' And Once More He Does the Ear Wigwag" 13

"I Don't Think I Ever Saw Auntie Come so Near Beamin' Before. She Seems Right at Home, Fieldin' That Line of Chat. And Vee, too, Is More or Less Under the Spell" 37

"'Pardon Me for Changing My Mind,' Says Clyde, as We Hits the Sidewalk, 'but I Think I Prefer to Walk Downtown.' 'Just What I Was Goin' to Spring on You,' Says I" 41

"For a Second It Looked like Gladys Was Goin' to Freeze with Horror; but She Just Gives Valentina the Once-over and Indulges in a Panicky Little Giggle" 81

"Then She Grips Me Around the Neck and Snuggles Her Head down on My Necktie,—Say, Then I Knew" 295

WILT THOU TORCHY

CHAPTER I

ON THE WAY WITH CYRIL

IT was a case of declarin' time out on the house. Uh-huh—a whole afternoon. What's the use bein' a private sec. in good standin' unless you can put one over on the time-clock now and then? Besides, I had a social date; and, now Mr. Robert is back on the job so steady and is gettin' so domestic in his habits, somebody's got to represent the Corrugated Trust at these function things.

The event was the openin' of the Pill Box; you know, one of these dinky little theaters where they do the capsule drama at two dollars a seat. Not that I've been givin' my theatrical taste the highbrow treatment. I'm still strong for the smokeless war play where the coisèd spy gets his'n good and hard.

But I understand this one-act stuff is the thing to see just now, and I'd picked up a hunch that Vee and Auntie had planned to be in on this openin' until Auntie's sciatica developed so

bad that they had to call it off. So it's me makin' the timely play with a couple of seats in E center and almost gettin' hugged for it. Even Auntie shoots me an approvin' glance as she hands down a favorable decision.

So we sits through five acts of piffle that was mostly talky junk to me. And, at that, I wa'n't sufferin' exactly; for when them actorines got too weird, all I had to do was swing a bit in my seat and I had a side view of a spiffy little white fur boa, with a pink ear-tip showin' under a ripple of corn-colored hair, and a—well, I had something worth watchin', that's all.

"Wasn't that last thing stupid?" says Vee.

"Didn't bother me any," says I. "Maybe I wa'n't followin' it real close."

"The idea!" says she. "Why come to the theater, anyway?"

"Lean closer and I'll whisper," says I.

"Silly!" says she. "Here! Have a chocolate."

"Toss," says I, openin' my mouth.

Vee snickers. "Suppose I missed and hit the fat man beyond?"

"It's a sportin' chance he takes," says I. "Shoot."

I had to bump Fatty a bit makin' the catch; but when he sees what the game is, he comes back with the friendly grin.

"There!" says Vee, tintin' up. "Now behave."

"Sorry," says I, "but I had to field my position, didn't I? Once more, now."

"Certainly not," says Vee. "Besides, there goes the curtain."

And if it hadn't been for interruptions like that we might have had a perfectly good time. We generally do when we're let alone. To sort of string the fun out I suggests goin' somewhere for tea. And it was while we're swappin' josh over the toasted crumpets and marmalade that we discovers a familiar-lookin' couple on the dancin' surface.

"Why, there's Doris!" says Vee.

"And the happy hubby!" I adds. "Hey, Westy! Come nourish yourself."

Maybe you remember that pair? Sappy Westlake, anyway. He's the noble, fair-haired youth that for a long time Auntie had all picked out as the chosen one for Vee, and he hung around constant until one lucky day Vee had this Doris Ull come for a visit.

Kind of a pouty, peevish queen, Doris was, you know. Spoiled at home, and the job finished at one of these flossy girls' boardin'-schools where they get a full course in court etiquette and learn to call the hired girl Smith quite haughty.

But she looked good to Westy, and, what with the help Vee and I gave 'em, they made a match of it. Months ago that must 'a' been, nearly a year. So I signals a tray-juggler to pull up more chairs, and we has quite a reunion.

Seems they'd been on a long honeymoon trip: done the whole Pacific coast, stopped off a while at Banff, and worked back home through Quebec and the White Mountains. Think of all the carfares and tips to bell-hops that means! He don't have to worry, though. Income is Westy's middle name. All he knows about it is that there's a trust company downtown somewheres that handles the estate and wishes on him quarterly a lot more'n he knows how to spend. Beastly bore!

"What a wonderful time you two must have had!" says Vee.

Doris shrugs her shoulders.

"Sightseeing always gives me a headache," says she. "And in the Canadian Rockies we nearly froze. I was glad to see New York again. But one tires of hotel life. Thank goodness, our house is ready at last. We moved in a week ago."

"Oh!" says Vee. "Then you're housekeeping?"

Doris nods. "It's quite thrilling," says she.

"At ten-thirty every morning I have the butler bring me Cook's list. Then I 'phone for the things myself. That is, I've just begun. Let me see, didn't I put in to-day's order in my—yes, here it is." And she fishes a piece of paper out of a platinum mesh bag. "Think of our needing all that—just Harold and me," she goes on.

"I should say so," says Vee, startin' to read over the items. "'Sugar, two pounds; tea, two pounds—'"

"Cook leaves the amounts to me," explains Doris; "so I just order two pounds of everything."

"Oh!" says Vee, readin' on. "'Butter, two pounds; eggs, two—' Do they sell eggs that way, Doris?"

"Don't they?" asks Doris. "I'm sure I don't know."

"'Coffee, two pounds,'" continues Vee. "'Yeast cakes, two pounds—' Why, wouldn't that be a lot of yeast cakes? They're such little things!"

"Perhaps," says Doris. "But then, I sha'n't have to bother ordering any more for a month, you see. Now, take the next item. 'Champagne wafers, ten pounds.' I'm fond of those. But that is the only time I broke my rule. See—'flour, two pounds; roast beef, two pounds,' and

so on. Oh, I mean to be quite systematic in my housekeeping!"

"Isn't she a wonder?" asks Westy, gazin' at her proud and mushy.

"I say, though, Vee," goes on Doris enthusiastic, "you must come home with us for dinner to-night. Do!"

At which Westy nudges her and whispers something behind his hand.

"Oh, yes," adds Doris. "You too, Torchy."

Vee had to 'phone Auntie and get Doris to back her up before the special dispensation was granted; but at six-thirty the four of us starts uptown for this brownstone bird-cage of happiness that Westy has taken a five-year lease of.

"Just think!" says Vee, as we unloads from the taxi. "You with a house of your own, and managing servants, and—"

"Oh!" remarks Doris, as she pushes the button. "I do hope you won't mind Cyril."

"Mind who?" says Vee.

"He—he's our butler," explains Westy. "I suppose he's a very good butler, too—the man at the employment agency said he was; but—er—"

"I'm sure he is," puts in Doris, "even if he does look a little odd. Then there is his name —Cyril Snee. Of course, Cyril doesn't sound

just right for a butler, does it? But Snee is so—so—"

"Isn't it?" says Vee. "I should call him Cyril."

"We started in that way," says Doris, "but he asked us not to; said he preferred to be called Snee. It was unusual, and besides he had private reasons. So between ourselves we speak of him as Cyril, and to his face— Well, I suppose we shall get used to saying Snee, though— Why, where can he be? I've rung twice and— Oh, here he comes!"

And, believe me, when Doris described him as lookin' a little odd she's said sumpun. Cyril was all of that. As far as figures goes he's big and impressive enough, with sort of a dignified bulge around the equator. But that face of his, with the white showin' through the pink, and the pink showin' through the white in the most unexpected places! Like a scraped radish. No, that don't give you the idea of his color scheme exactly. Say a half parboiled baby. For the pink spots on his chin and forehead was baby pink, and the white of his cheeks and ears was a clear, waxy white, like he'd been made up by an artist. Then, the thin gray hair, cropped so close the pink scalp glimmered through; and the wide mouth with the quirky corners; and the greenish pop-eyes with the heavy

bags underneath—well, that was a map to remember.

And the worst of it was, I couldn't. Sure, I'd met it. No doubt about that. But I follows the bunch into the house like I was in a trance, starin' at Cyril over Westy's shoulder and askin' myself urgent, "Where have I seen that face before?" No, I couldn't place him. And you know how a thing like that will bother you. It got me in the appetite.

Maybe it was just as well, too, for I'd got half way through the soup before I notices anything the matter with it. My guess was that it tasted scorchy. I glances around at Vee, and finds she's just makin' a bluff at eatin' hers. Doris and Westy ain't even doin' that, and when I drops my spoon Doris signals to take it away. Which Cyril does, movin' as solemn and dignified as if he was usherin' at a funeral. Then there's a stage wait for three or four minutes before the fish is brought in, Cyril paddin' around ponderous with the plates. Doris beckons him up and demands in a whisper:

"Where is Helma?"

"Helma, ma'am," says he, "is taking the evening out."

"But—" begins Doris, then stops and bites her lip.

The fish could have stood some of the surplus

cookin' that the soup got. It wa'n't exactly eatable fish, and the potato marbles that come with it should have been numbered; then they'd be useful in Kelley pool. Yes, they was a bit hard. Doris gets red under the eyes and waves out the fish.

She stands it, though, until that two-pound roast is put before Westy. Not such a whale of a roast, it ain't. It's a one-rib affair, like an overgrown chop, and it reposes lonesome in the middle of a big silver platter. It's done, all right. Couldn't have been more so if it had been cooked in a blast-furnace. Even the bone was charred through.

Westy he gazes at it in his mild, helpless way, and pokes it doubtful with the carvin'-fork.

"I say, Cyr—er—Snee," says he, "what's this?"

"The roast, sir," says the butler.

"The deuce it is!" says Westy. "Do—do I use a saw or dynamite?" And he stares across at Doris inquirin'.

"Snee," says Doris, her upper lip tremblin', "you—you may take it away."

"Back to the kitchen, ma'am?" asks Cyril.

"Ye-es," says Doris. "Certainly."

"Very well, ma'am," says Cyril, sort of tragic and mysterious.

He hadn't more'n got through the swing-door before Doris slumps in her chair, puts her face into her hands, and begins lettin' out the sobs reckless. Course, Westy jumps to the rescue and starts pattin' her on the back and offerin' soothin' words. So does Vee.

"There, there!" says Vee. "We don't mind a bit. Such things are bound to happen."

"But I—I don't know what to do," sobs Doris. "It's—it's been getting worse every day. They began all right—the servants, I mean. But yesterday Marie was impudent, and to-night Helma has gone out when she shouldn't, and now Cook has spoiled everything, and—"

We ain't favored with the rest of the sad tale, for just then there's a quick scuff of feet, and Cyril comes skatin' through the pantry door and does a frantic dive behind the sideboard.

Doris straightens up, brushes her eyes clear, and makes a brave stab at bein' dignified.

"Snee," says she, real reprovin'.

"I—I beg pardon, ma'am," says Cyril, edgin' out and revealin' a broad black smooch on his shirt-front as well as a few other un-butlery signs.

"Why, whatever has happened to you?" demands Doris.

"I'm not complaining, ma'am," says Cyril; "but Cook, you see, she—she didn't like it be-

cause of my bringing back the roast. And I'm not very good at dodging, ma'am."

"Oh!" says Doris, shudderin'.

"It struck me here, ma'am," says Cyril, indicatin' the exact spot.

"Yes, yes, I see," says Doris. "I—I'm sorry, Snee."

"Not at all, ma'am," objects Cyril. "My fault entirely. I should have jumped quicker. And it might have been the pudding. That wouldn't have hit so hard, but it would have splashed more. You see, ma'am, I—"

"Never mind, Snee," cuts in Doris, tryin' to stop him.

"I don't, ma'am, I assure you," says Cyril, pluckin' a spray of parsley off his collar. "I was only going to remark what a wonderful true eye Cook has, ma'am; and her in liquor, at that."

"Oh, oh!" squeals Doris panicky.

"It began when I brought her the brandy for the pudding sauce, ma'am," goes on Cyril, real chatty. "She'd had only one glass when she begins chucking me under the chin and calling me Dearie. Not that I ever gave her any cause, ma'am, to—"

"Please!" wails Doris. "Harold! Stop him, can't you?"

And say, can you see Sappy Westlake stop-

pin' anything? Specially such a runnin' stream as this here now Cyril. But he comes to life for one faint effort.

"I say, you know," he starts in, "perhaps you'd best say no more about it, Snee."

"As you like, sir," says Cyril. "Only, I don't wish my feelings considered. Not in the least. If you care to send back the salad I will gladly—"

Westy glances appealin' towards me.

"Torchy," says he, "couldn't you—"

Couldn't I, though! Say, I'd just been yearnin' to crash into this affair for the last five minutes. I'd remembered Cyril. At least, I thought I had. And I proceeds to rap for order with a table-knife.

"Excuse me, Mr. Snee," says I, "but you ain't been called on for a monologue. You can print the whole story of how kitchen neutrality was violated, issue a yellow book, if you like; but just for the minute try to forget that assault with the roast and see if you can remember ever havin' met me before. Can you?"

Don't seem to faze Cyril a bit. He takes a good look at me and then shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, sir," says he, "but I'm afraid I'm stupid about such things. I can sometimes recall names very readily, but faces—"

"How long since you quit jugglin' pies and

"'I REFER,' SAYS CYRIL, 'TO THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SACRED OWLS.'
AND ONCE MORE HE DOES THE EAR WIGWAG."

sandwiches at the quick-lunch joint?" says I.

"Three months, sir," says he prompt.

"Tied the can to you, did they?" says I.

"I was discharged, sir," says Cyril. "The proprietor objected to my talking so much to customers. I suppose he was quite right. One of my many failings, sir."

"I believe you," says I. "So you took up buttling, eh? Wa'n't that some nervy jump?"

"I considered it a helpful step in my career," says he.

"Your which?" says I.

"Perhaps I should put it," says he, "that the work seemed to offer the discipline which would make me most useful to our noble order."

And as he says the last two words he puts his palms at right angles to his ears, thumbs in, and bows three times.

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'.

"I refer," says Cyril, "to the Brotherhood of the Sacred Owls, which is also named the Sublime Order of Humility and Wisdom."

And once more he does the ear wigwag. Believe me, he had us all gaspin'.

"Vurra good, Eddie!" says I. "Sacred Owls, eh? What is that—one of these insurance schemes?"

"There are both mortuary and sick benefits appertaining to membership," says Cyril, "but

our chief aim and purpose is to acquire humility and wisdom. It so happens that I have been named as candidate for Grand Organizer of the East, and at our next solemn conclave, to be held—"

"I get you," says I. "I can see where you might find some practice in bein' humble by butlin', but how about gettin' wise?"

"With humility comes wisdom, as our public ritual has it," says Cyril. "In the text-book which I studied—'The Perfect Butler'—there was very little about being humble, however. But my cousin, who conducts an employment agency, assured me that could only be acquired by practice. So he secured me several positions. He was wholly correct. I have been discharged on an average of once a week for the last two months, and on each occasion I have discovered newer and deeper depths of humility."

I draws a long breath and gazes admirin' at Cyril. Then I turns to the Westlakes.

"Westy," says I, "do you want to accommodate Mr. Snee with a fresh chance of perfectin' himself for the Sublime Order?"

He nods. So does Doris.

"It's a unanimous vote, Cyril," says I. "You're fired. Not for failin' to duck the roast, understand, but because you're too gabby."

"Thank you, sir," says he, actin' a little disappointed. "I am to leave at once, I suppose?"

"No," says I. "Stop long enough in the kitchen to tell Cook she gets the chuck, too. After that, if you ain't qualified as Grand Imperial Organizer of the whole United States, then the Sacred Owls don't know their business. By-by, Cyril. We're backin' you to win, remember."

And as I pushes him through the pantry door I locks it behind him. Followin' which, Doris uses the powder-puff under her eyes a little and we adjourns to the Plutoria palm-room, where we had a perfectly good dinner, all the humility Westy could buy with a two-dollar tip, and no folksy chatter on the side.

Next day the Westlakes calls up another agency, and by night they had an entire new line of help on the job.

What do you guess, though? Here yesterday afternoon I leaves the office on the jump and chases up to the apartment house where Vee and Auntie are settled for the winter. My idea was that I might catch Vee comin' home from a shoppin' orgie, or the matinée, or something, and get a few minutes' conversation in the lobby.

The elevator-boy says she's out, too, so it looks like I was a winner. I waits half an hour

and she don't show up, and I'm just about to take a chance on ringin' up Auntie for information, when in she comes, chirky and smilin', with rose leaves sprinkled on both cheeks and her eyes sparklin'. Also she has a bundle of books under one arm.

"Why the literature?" says I. "Goin' to read Auntie to sleep?"

"There!" says she, poutin' cute. "I wasn't going to let anyone know. I've started in at college."

"Wha-a-at!" says I. "You ain't never goin' to be a lady doctor or anything like that, are you?"

"I am taking a course at Columbia," says Vee, "in domestic science. Doris is doing it, too. And such fun! To-day we learned how to make a bed—actually made it up, too. To-morrow I am going to boil potatoes."

"Hel-lup!" says I. "You are? Say, how long does this last?"

"It's a two-year course," says Vee.

"Stick to it," says I. "That'll give me time to take lessons from Westy on how to get an income wished onto me."

As it stands, though, Vee's got me distanced. Please, ain't somebody got a plute aunt to spare?

CHAPTER II

TOWING CECIL TO A SMEAR

Just think! If it had turned out a little different I might have been called to stand on a platform in front of City Hall while the Mayor wished a Victoria Cross or something like that on me.

No, I ain't been nearer the front than Third Avenue, but at that I've come mighty near gettin' on the firin' line, and the only reason I missed out on pullin' a hero stunt was that Maggie wa'n't runnin' true to form.

It was like this. Here the other mornin', as I'm sittin' placid at my desk dictatin' routine correspondence into a wax cylinder that's warranted not to yank gum or smell of frangipani —sittin' there dignified and a bit haughty, like a highborn private sec. ought to, you know— who should come paddin' up to my elbow but the main wheeze, Old Hickory Ellins.

"Son," says he, "can any of that wait?"

"Guess it wouldn't spoil, sir," says I, switchin' off the duflicker.

"Good!" says he. "I think I can employ your

peculiar talents to better advantage for the next few hours. I trust that you are prepared to face the British War Office?"

Suspectin' that he's about to indulge in his semi-annual josh, I only grins expectant.

"We have with us this morning," he goes on, "one Lieutenant Cecil Fothergill, just arrived from London. Perhaps you saw him as he was shown in half an hour or so ago?"

"The solemn-lookin' gink with the long face, one wanderin' eye, and the square-set shoulders?" says I. "Him in the light tan ridin'-breeches and the black cutaway?"

"Precisely," says Mr. Ellins.

"Huh!" says I. "Army officer? I had him listed as a rail-bird from the Horse Show."

"He presents credentials signed by General Kitchener," says Old Hickory. "He's looking up munition contracts. Not the financial end. Nor is he an artillery expert. Just exactly what he is here for I've failed to discover, and I am too busy to bother with him."

"I get you," says I. "You want him shunted."

Old Hickory nods.

"Quite delicately, however," he goes on. "The Lieutenant seems to have something on his mind—something heavy. I infer that he wishes to do a little inspecting."

"Oh!" says I.

You see, along late in the summer, one of our Wall Street men had copped out a whalin' big shell-case contract for us, gayly ignorin' the fact that this was clean out of our line.

How Old Hickory did roast him for it at the time! But when he come to figure out the profits, Mr. Ellins don't do a thing but rustle around, lease all the stray factories in the market, from a canned gas plant in Bayonne to a radiator foundry in Yonkers, fit 'em up with the proper machinery, and set 'em to turnin' out battle pills by the trainload.

"I gather," says Mr. Ellins, "that the Lieutenant suspects we are not taking elaborate precautions to safeguard our munition plants from —well, Heaven knows what. So if you could show him around and ease his mind any it would be helpful. At least, it would be a relief to me just now. Come in and meet him."

My idea was to chirk him up at the start.

"Howdy, Lieutenant," says I, extendin' the cordial palm.

But both the Lieutenant's eyes must have been wanderin', for he don't seem to notice my friendly play.

"Ha-ar-r-r yuh," he rumbles from somewhere below his collar-button, and with great effort he manages to focus on me with his good

lamp. For a single-barreled look-over, it's a keen one, too—like bein' stabbed with a cheese-tester. But it's soon over, and the next minute he's listenin' thoughtful while Old Hickory is explainin' how I'm the one who can tow him around the munition shops.

"Torchy," Mr. Ellins winds up with, shootin' me a meanin' look from under his bushy eyebrows, "I want you to show the Lieutenant our main works."

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'. For he knew very well there wa'n't any such thing.

His left eyelid does a slow flutter.

"The main works, you understand," he repeats. "And see that Lieutenant Fothergill is well taken care of. You will find the limousine waiting."

"Yes, sir," says I. "I'm right behind you."

Course, if Mr. Robert had been there instead of off honeymoonin', this would have been his job. He'd have towed Cecil to his club, fed him Martinis and vintage stuff until he couldn't have told a 32-inch shell from an ashcan; handed him a smooth spiel about capacity, strain tests, shipping facilities, and so on, and dumped him at his hotel entirely satisfied that all was well, without having been off Fifth Avenue.

The best I can do, though, is to steer him into

a flossy Broadway grill, shove him the wine-card with the menu, and tell him to go the limit.

He orders a pot of tea and a combination chop.

"Oh, say, have another guess," says I. "What's the matter with that squab caserole and something in a silver ice-bucket?"

"Thank you, no," says he. "I—er—my nerves, you know."

I couldn't deny that he looked it, either. Such a high-strung, jumpy party he is, always glancin' around suspicious. And that wanderin' store eye of his, scoutin' about on its own hook independent of the other, sort of adds to the general sleuthy effect. Kind of weird, too.

But I tries to forget that and get down to business.

"Surprisin', ain't it," says I, "how many of them shells can be turned out by—"

"S-s-s-sh!" says he, glancin' cautious at the omnibus-boy comin' to set up our table.

"Eh?" says I, after we've been supplied with rolls and sweet butter and ice water. "Why the panic?"

"Spies!" he whispers husky.

"What, him?" says I, starin' after the innocent-lookin' party in the white apron.

"There's no telling," says Cecil. "One can't be too careful. And it will be best, I think, for

you to address me simply as Mr. Fothergill. As for the—er—goods you are producing, you might speak of them as—er—hams, you know."

I expect I gawped at him some foolish. Think of springin' all that mystery dope right on Broadway! And, as I'm none too anxious to talk about shells anyway, we don't have such a chatty luncheon. I'm just as satisfied. I wanted time to think what I should exhibit as the main works.

That Bayonne plant wa'n't much to look at, just a few sheds and a spur track. I hadn't been to the Yonkers foundry, but I had an idea it wa'n't much more impressive. Course, there was the joint on East 153d Street. I knew that well enough, for I'd helped negotiate the lease.

It had been run by a firm that was buildin' some new kind of marine motors, but had gone broke. Used to be a stove works, I believe.

Anyway, it's only a two-story cement-block affair, jammed in between some car-barns on one side and a brewery on the other. Hot proposition to trot out as the big end of a six-million-dollar contract! But it was the best I had to offer, and after the Lieutenant had finished his Oolong and lighted a cigarette I loads him into the limousine again and we shoots uptown.

"Here we are," says I, as we turns into a

cross street just before it ends in the East River. "The main works," and I waves my hand around casual.

"Ah, yes," says he, gettin' his eye on the tall brick stack of the brewery and then lettin' his gaze roam across to the car-barns.

"Temporary quarters," says I. "Kind of miscellaneous, ain't they? Here's the main entrance. Let's go in here first." And I steers him through the office door of the middle buildin'. Then I hunts up the superintendent.

"Just takin' a ramble through the works," says I. "Don't bother. We'll find our way."

Some busy little scene it is, too, with all them lathes and things goin', belts whirrin' overhead, and workmen in undershirts about as thick as they could be placed.

I towed Cecil in and out of rooms, up and down stairs, until he must have been dizzy, and ends by leadin' him into the yard.

"Storage sheds," says I, pointin' to the neat rows of shell-cases piled from the ground to the roof. "And a dozen motor-trucks haulin' 'em away all the time."

The Lieutenant he inspects some of 'em, lookin' wise; and then he walks to the back, where there's a high board fence with barbed wire on top. "What's over there?" says he.

"Blamed if I know," says I.

"It's rather important," says he. "Let's have a look."

I didn't get the connection, but I helped him shove a packin'-case up against the fence, so he could climb up. For a minute or so he stares, then he ducks down and beckons to me.

"I say," he whispers. "Come up here. Don't show your head. There! What do you make of that?"

So I'm prepared for something tragic and thrillin'. But all I can see is an old slate-roofed house, one of these weather-beaten, dormer-windowed relics of the time when that part of town was still in the suburbs. There's quite a big yard in the back, with a few scrubby old pear trees, a double row of mangy box-bushes, and other traces of what must have been a garden.

In the far corner is a crazy old summer-house with a saggin' roof and the sides covered with tar paper. There's a door to it, fastened with a big red padlock.

Standin' on the back porch of the house are two of the help, so I judged. One is a square-built female with a stupid, heavy face, while the other is a tall, skinny old girl with narrow-set eyes and a sharp nose.

"Well," says I, "where's your riot?"

"S-s-s-sh!" says he. "They're up to some

mischief. One of them is hiding something under her shawl. Watch."

Sure enough, the skinny one did have her left elbow stuck out, and there was a bulge in the shawl.

"Looks like a case of emptyin' the ashes," says I.

"Or of placing a bomb," whispers the Lieutenant.

"Mooshwaw!" says I. "Bomb your aunt! What for should they—"

"Look now!" he breaks in. "There!"

They're advancin' in single file, slow and stealthy, and gazin' around cautious. Mainly they seem to be watchin' the back fire-escapes of the flat buildin' next door, but now and then one of 'em turns and glances towards the old house they've just left. They make straight for the shack in the corner of the yard, and in a minute more the fat one has produced a key and is fumblin' with the red padlock.

She opens the door only far enough to let the slim one slip in, then stands with her back against it, her eyes rollin' first one way and then the other.

Two or three minutes the slim one was in there, then she slides out, the door is locked, and she scuttles off towards the house, the wide one waddlin' behind her.

"My word!" gasps the Lieutenant. "Right against the wing of your factory, that shed is. And a bomb of that size would blow it into match-wood."

"That's so," says I.

Course, we hadn't really seen any bomb; but, what with the odd notions of them two females and the Lieutenant's panicky talk, I was feelin' almost jumpy myself.

"A time-fuse, most likely," says he, "set for midnight. That should give us several hours. We must find out who lives in that house."

"Ought to be simple," says I. "Come on."

We chases around the block and rings up the janitor of the flat buildin'. He's a wrinkled, blear-eyed old pirate, just on his way to the corner with a tin growler.

"Yah! You won't git in to sell him no books," says he, leerin' at us.

"Think so?" says I, displayin' a quarter temptin'. "Maybe if we had his name, though, and knew something about him, we might—"

"It's Bauer," says the janitor, eyein' the two bits longin'. "Herman Z. Bauer; a big brewer once, but now—yah, an old cripple. Gout, they say. And mean as he is rich. See that high fence? He built that to shut off our light—the swine! Bauer, his name is. You ask for Herman Bauer. Maybe you get in."

"Thanks, old sport," says I, slippin' him the quarter. "Give him your best regards, shall I?"

And as he goes off chucklin' the Lieutenant whispers hoarse:

"Hah! I knew it. Bauer, eh? And to-night he'll be sitting at one of those back windows, his ears stuffed with cotton, watching to see your plant blown up. We must have the constables here right away."

"On what charge?" says I. "That two of the kitchen maids was seen in their own back yard? You know you can't spring that safety-of-the-realm stuff over here. The police would only give us the laugh. We got to have something definite to tell the sergeant. Let's go after it."

"But I say!" protests Cecil. "Just how, you know?"

"Not by stickin' here, anyway," says I. "Kick in and use your bean, is my program. Come along and see what happens."

So first off we strolls past and has a look at the place. It's shut in by a rusty iron fence with high spiked pickets. The house sets well back from the sidewalk, and the front is nearly covered by some sort of vine. At the side there are double gates openin' into a grass-grown driveway.

I was just noticin' that they was chained and

locked when the Lieutenant gives me a nudge and pulls me along by the coat sleeve. I gets a glimpse of the square-built female waddlin' around the corner of the house. We passes by innocent and hangs up in front of a plumber's shop, starin' in at a fascinatin' display of one bathtub and a second-hand hot-water boiler. Out of the corner of my eye, though, I could see her scout up and down the street, unfasten the gate, and then disappear.

"Huh!" says I. "Kitchen comp'ny expected."

"Or more conspirators," adds Cecil. "By Jove! Isn't this one now?"

There's no denyin' he looked the part, this short-legged, long-armed, heavy-podded gent with the greasy old derby tilted rakish over one ear. Such a hard face he has, a reg'lar low-brow map, and a neck like a choppin'-block. His stubby legs are sprung out at the knees, and his arms have a good deal the same curve.

"Built like a dachshund, ain't he?" I remarks.

"Quite so," says Fothergill. "See, he's stopping. And he has a bundle under one arm."

"Overalls," says I. "Plumber, maybe."

"Isn't that a knife-handle sticking out of the end of the bundle?" asks the Lieutenant.

So it was; a butcher knife, at that. He has

stopped opposite the double gates and is scowlin' around. Then he glances quick at the house. A side shutter opens just then and a dust-cloth is shaken vigorous. Seein' which, he promptly pushes through the gates.

"Ha!" says the Lieutenant. "A signal. He'll be the one to attach the fuse and light it, eh?"

Well, I admit that up to that time I hadn't been takin' all this very serious, discountin' most of Cecil's suspicions as due to an overworked imagination. But now I'm beginnin' to feel thrills down my spine.

What if this was a bomb plot? Some sort of bunk was being put over here—no gettin' away from that. And if one of our shell factories was in danger of being dynamited, here was my cue to make a medal play, wa'n't it?

"I am for telephoning the authorities at once," announces Cecil.

"Ah, you don't know our bonehead cops," says I. "Besides, if we can block the game ourselves, what's the use? Let's get 'em in the act. I'm going to pipe off our friend with the meat-knife."

"I—I've only a .34-caliber automatic with me," says the Lieutenant, reachin' into his side pocket.

"Well, you don't want a machine-gun, do

you?" says I. "And don't go shootin' reckless. Here, lemme get on the other side. Close to the house, now, on the grass, until we can get a peek around the—"

"S-s-s-sh!" says Cecil, grippin' my arm.

He was strong on shushin' me up, the Lieutenant was. This time, though, he had the right dope; for a few steps more and we got a view of the back porch.

And there are the two maids, hand in hand, watchin' the motions of the squatty gent, who is unlockin' the summer-house. He disappears inside.

At that Cecil just has to cut loose. Before I can stop him, he's stepped out, pulled his gun, and is wavin' it at the two females.

"I say, now! Hands up! No nonsense," he orders.

"Howly saints!" wails the square-built party, clutchin' the slim one desperate. "Maggie! Maggie!"

Maggie she's turned pale in the gills, her mouth is hangin' open, and her eyes are bugged; but she ain't too scared to put up an argument.

"Have yez a warrant?" she demands. "Annyways, my Cousin Tim Fealey'll go bail for us. An' if it was that Swede janitor next door made the complaint on us I'll—"

"Woman!" breaks in the Lieutenant. "Don't

you know that you have been apprehended in a grave offense? You'd best tell all. Now, who put you up to this? Your master, eh?"

"Howly saints! Mr. Bauer!" groans the fat one.

"For the love of the saints, don't tell him!" says Maggie. "Don't tell Mr. Bauer, there's a dear. It was off'm Cousin Tim we got it."

"That miscreant in the shed there?" asks the Lieutenant.

"Him?" says Maggie. "Lord love ye, no. That's only Schwartzenberger, from the slaughter-house. And please, Mister, it'll be gone the mornin'—ivry bit gone."

"Oh, will it!" says Cecil sarcastic. "But you'll be in prison first."

"Wurra! Wurra!" moans the fat female. "Save us, Maggie! Let him have it for the takin's."

"I will not, then," says Maggie. "Not if he's the president of the Board of Health himself."

"Enough of this," says the Lieutenant. "Hands up, you bomb plotters!"

But about then I'd begun to acquire the hunch that we might be makin' a slight mistake, and that it was time for me to crash in. Which I does.

"Excuse me," says I; "but maybe it would

help, Maggie, if you'd say right out what it is you've got in the shed there."

"What is ut?" says she, tossin' her head defiant. "As though you didn't know! Well, it's a pig, then."

"A pig!" sneers the Lieutenant. "Very likely, that is!"

"Yez didn't think it was a hip-pot-ta-mus, did ye?" comes back Maggie. "An' why should you be after botherin' us with your health ordinances—two poor girls that has a chance to turn a few pennies, with pork so dear? 'Look at all that good swill goin' to waste,' says I to Katie here. 'An' who's to care if I do boil some extra praties now an' then? Mr. Bauer's that rich, ain't he? An' what harm at all should there be in raisin' one little shoat in th' back yard?' So there, Mister! Do your worst. An' maybe it's only a warnin' I'll get from th' justice when he hears how Schwartzenberger's killed and dressed and taken him off before daylight. There he goes, the poor darlint! That's his last squeal."

We didn't need to stretch our ears to catch it. I looks over at the Lieutenant and grins foolish. But he wouldn't be satisfied until Maggie had towed him out to view the remains. He's pink behind the ears when he comes back, too.

"Please, Mister Inspector," says Maggie, "you'll not have us up this time, will yez?"

"Bah!" says Cecil.

"Seein' it's you," says I, "he won't. Course, though, a report of this plot of yours'll have to be made to the British War Office."

"Oh, I say now!" protests the Lieutenant.

And all the way down to his hotel he holds that vivid neck tint.

"Well," says Old Hickory, as I drifts back to the office, "did you and the Lieutenant discover any serious plot of international character?"

"Sure thing!" says I. "We found a contraband Irish pig in Herman Bauer's back yard.

"Wha-a-at?" he demands.

"If the pig had been a bomb, and its tail a time-fuse," says I, "it would have wrecked our main works. As it is, we've had a narrow escape. But I don't think Cecil will bother us any more. He's too good for the army, anyway. He ought to be writin' for the movies."

CHAPTER III

TORCHY HANDS OUT A SPILL

MAYBE I've indulged, now and then, in a few remarks on Auntie. But, say, there's no danger of exhaustin' the subject—not a chance. For she's some complicated old girl, take it from me. First off, there's that stick-around disposition of hers. Now, I expect that just naturally grew on her, same as my pink thatch did on me. She can't help it; and what's the use blamin' her for it?

So, when I drop in for my reg'lar Wednesday and Sunday night calls, the main object of the expedition being to swap a little friendly chatter with Vee, and I find Auntie planted prominent and permanent in the sittin'-room, why, I just grins and makes the best of it.

A patient and consistent sitter-out, Auntie is. And you know that face of hers ain't exactly the chirky sort. Don't encourage you to get chummy, or tip her the confidential wink, or chuck her under the chin. Nothing like that—no.

Not a reg'lar battle-ax, you understand. For

all that, she ain't such a bad-lookin' old dame, when you get her in a dim light. Though the expression she generally favors me with, while it ain't so near assault and battery as it used to be, wouldn't take the place of two lumps in a cup of tea.

But you kind of get used to that acetic acid stuff after a while; and, since I'm announced by a reg'lar name now—"Meestir Beel-lard" is Helma's best stab at Ballard—and Auntie knowin' that I got a perfectly good uncle behind me, besides bein' a private sec. myself, why, she don't mean morn'n half of it.

Besides, even with her sittin' right there in the room, there's a lot doin' that she ain't in on. Trust Vee. Say, she can drum out classical stuff on the piano and fire a snappy line of repartee at me all the while, just loud enough for me to catch and no more, without battin' an eye. Say, I'm gettin' quite a musical education, just helpin' to stall off Auntie that way. And you should see the cute schemes Vee puts over —settin' a framed photo so it throws the light in the old girl's eyes, or shiftin' our chairs so she has to stretch her neck to keep track of us.

Makes an evenin' call quite an excitin' game; and when we work in a few minutes of hand-holdin', or I get away with a hasty clinch, why, that scores for our side. So, for a personally

conducted affair, it ain't so poor. I'm missin' no dates, I notice. And tuck this away; if it was a case of Vee and a whole squad of aunts, or an uninterrupted two-some with one of these nobody-home dolls, I'd pick Vee and the gallery. Uh-huh! I'm just that good to myself.

All was goin' along smooth and merry, too, until one Wednesday night I discovers another lid ahead of mine on the hall table. It's a glossy silk tile, with a pair of gray castor gloves folded neat alongside. Seein' which I reaches past Helma for the silver card-tray.

"Huh!" says I under my breath. "Now, who the giddy gallowampuses is Clyde Creighton?"

"Vair nice gentlemans, Meester Creeton," whispers Helma.

"I know," says I; "you're judgin' by the hat."

She springs that silly grin of hers, as usual. No matter what I say, it gets open-faced motions out of Helma. But I really wasn't feelin' so humorous. Whoever he was, this Creighton guy had come the wrong evenin'. Course, I judged it must be Vee he's callin' on, and I wasn't strong for a three-handed session just then. There was something special I wanted to talk over with Vee this particular evenin', and I couldn't see why—

"I don't think I ever saw Auntie come so near beamin' before. She seems right at home, fieldin' that line of chat. And Vee, too, is more or less under the spell."

But my first glimpse of Clyde soothes me down a lot. He has curly gray hair, also a mustache that's well frosted up. He's a tall, slim built party, with a wide black ribbon to tie him to his eyeglasses. Seems to be entertainin' Auntie.

"Ah!" says he, inspectin' me casual over the shell rims. "Mr. Ballard?" And, with a skimpy little nod, he turns back to Auntie and goes on where he broke off, leavin' me to shake hands with myself if I wanted to.

I expect it served me right, cuttin' in abrupt on such a highbrow conversation as that. Something about the pre-Raphael tendencies of the Barbizon school, I think.

Culture! Say, if I'm any judge, Claude was battin' about 400. It fairly dripped from him. Talk about broad *a*'s—he spilled 'em easy and natural, a font to a galley; and he couldn't any more miss the final *g* than a telephone girl would overlook rollin' her *r*'s. And such graceful gestures with the shell-rimmed glasses, wavin' 'em the whole length of the ribbon when he got real interested.

I don't think I ever saw Auntie come so near beamin' before. She seems right at home, fieldin' that line of chat. And Vee, too, is more or less under the spell. As for me, I'm on the

outside lookin' in. I did manage though, after doin' the dummy act for half an hour, to lead Vee off to the window alcove and get in a few words.

"Who's the professor?" says I.

"Why, he isn't a professor," says Vee.

"He's got the patter," says I. "Old friend of Auntie's, I take it?"

No, it wasn't quite that. Seems the late Mrs. Creighton had been a chum of Auntie's 'way back when they was girls, and the fact had only been discovered when Clyde and Auntie got together a few days before at some studio tea doins'.

"About how late was the late Mrs. C. C.?" says I.

"Oh, he has been a widower for several years, I think," says Vee. "Poor man! Isn't he distinguished-looking?"

"Ye-e-es," says I. "A bit stagey."

"How absurd!" says she. "Isn't it fascinating to hear him talk?"

"Reg'lar paralyzin'," says I. "I was gettin' numb from the knees down."

"Silly!" says Vee, givin' me a reprovin' pat. "Do be quiet; he is telling Auntie about his wife now."

Yep, he was. Doin' it beautiful too, sayin' what a lovely character she had, how congenial

they was, and what an inspiration she'd been to him in his career.

"Indeed," he goes on, "if it had not been for the gentle influence of my beloved Alicia, I should not be what I am to-day."

"Say," I whispers, nudgin' Vee, "what is he to-day?"

"Why," says she, "why—er—I don't quite know. He collects antiques, for one thing."

"Does he?" says I. "Then maybe he's after Auntie."

First off Vee snickers, after which she lets on to be peeved and proceeds to rumple my hair. Clyde catches her at it too, and looks sort of pained. But Auntie's too much interested in the reminiscences to notice. Yes, there's no discountin' the fact that the old girl was fallin' for him hard.

Not that we thought much about it at that time. But later on, when I finds he's been droppin' in for tea, been there for dinner Saturday, and has beat me to it again Sunday evenin', I begins to sprout suspicions.

"He seems to be gettin' the habit, eh?" I suggests to Vee.

She don't deny it.

"Who's doin' the rushin'," says I, "him or Auntie?"

Vee shrugs her shoulders. "He came around

to-night," says she, "to show Auntie some miniatures of the late Alicia. She asked to see them. Look! They are examining one now."

Sure enough they were, with their heads close together. And Auntie is pattin' him soothin' on the arm.

"Kind of kittenish motions, if you ask me," says I. "She's gazin' at him mushy, too."

"I never knew Auntie to be quite so absurd," says Vee.

"Say," I whispers, "how about givin' 'em a sample of the butt-in act, so they'll know how it seems?"

Vee smothers a giggle.

"Let's!" says she.

So we leaves the alcove and crashes in on this close-harmony duet. Vee has to see the miniatures of Alicia, and she has to show 'em to me. Also we pulls up chairs and sits there, listenin' with our mouths open, right in the midst of things.

Auntie does her best to shunt us, too.

"Verona," says she, "why don't you and Torchy get out the chafing-dish and make some of that delicious maple fudge you are so fond of?"

"Why, Aunty!" says Vee. "When you know I've stopped eating candy for a month."

"You might play something for him," is

"'Pardon me for changing my mind,' says Clyde, as we hits the sidewalk, 'but I think I prefer to walk downtown.' 'Just what I was goin' to spring on you,' says I."

Auntie's next suggestion. "That new chanson."

"But we'd much rather listen to you and Mr. Creighton," says Vee. "Hadn't we, Torchy?"

"Uh-huh," says I.

"Quite flattering, I'm sure," puts in Clyde, smilin' sarcastic, while Auntie shoots a doubtful look at me.

But we hung around just the same, and before ten o'clock Creighton announces that he must really be going.

"Me too," says I, cheerful. "I'll ride down with you if you don't mind."

"Oh, charmed!" says Clyde.

It wasn't that I was so strong for his comp'ny, but I'd just annexed the idea that it might be a good hunch to get a little line on exactly who this Mr. Clyde Creighton was. Vee don't seem to know anything very definite about him, outside of the Alicia incident; and it struck me that if there was a prospect of havin' him in the fam'ly, as it were, someone ought to see his credentials. Anyway, it wouldn't do any harm to pump him a bit.

"Pardon me for changing my mind," says Clyde, as we hits the sidewalk, "but I think I prefer to walk downtown."

"Just what I was goin' to spring on you," says I. "Fine evenin' for a little thirty-block

saunter, too. Let's see, the Plutoria's where you're stayin', ain't it?"

"Why—er—yes," says he, hesitatin'.

I couldn't make out why he should choke over it, for I'd heard him say distinctly he was livin' there. But it was amazin' what an effect the night air had on his conversation works. Seemed to dry 'em up.

"Interested in antiques, are you?" says I, sort of folksy.

"Somewhat," says Clyde, steppin' out brisk.

"Odd line," says I. "Now, I could never see much percentage in havin' grandfathers' clocks and old spinnin'-wheels and such junk around."

"Really," says he.

"One of your fads, I expect?" says I.

"M-m-m," says he.

"Shouldn't think you'd find room in a hotel for such stuff," I goes on, doin' a hop-skip across a curb, "or do you have another joint, too?"

"Quite so," says he. "Studio."

"Oh!" says I. "Whereabouts?"

"In town," says he.

"Yes, most of 'em are," says I. "But I expect you'll be gettin' married again some of these days and settin' up a reg'lar home, eh?"

He stops short and gives me a stare.

"If I feel the need of discussing the project," says he, "I shall remember that you are available."

"Oh, don't mention it," says I.

Somehow, I didn't tap Clyde for so much real information. In fact, if I'd been at all touchy I might have worked up the notion that I was bein' snubbed.

I keeps step with Mr. Creighton clear to his hotel, where he swings in the Fifth Avenue entrance without wastin' any breath over fond adieus. I can't say why I didn't go on home then, instead of hangin' up outside. Maybe it was because the sidewalk taxi agent had sort of a familiar look, or perhaps I had an idea I was bein' sleuthy.

Must have been four or five minutes I'd been standin' there, starin' at the entrance, when out through the revolvin' door breezes Clyde, puffin' a cigarette and swingin' his walkin'-stick jaunty. He don't spot me until he's about to brush by, and then he stops short.

"Forgot something?" I suggests.

"Ah—er—evidently," says he, and whirls and marches back into the hotel.

"Huh!" says I, indicatin' nothin' much.

"Where to, sir?" says someone at my elbow.

It's the taxi agent, who has drifted up and mistaken me for a foolish guest.

Kind of a throaty, husky voice he has, that you wouldn't forget easy; and I knew them aëroplane ears of his couldn't be duplicated.

"Why, hello, Loppy!" says I. "How long since you quit runnin' copy in the Sunday room?"

"Well, blow me!" says he. "Torchy, eh?"

That's what comes of havin' been in the newspaper business once. You never know when you're going to run across one of the old crowd. I cut short the reunion, though, to ask about Creighton.

"The swell in the silk lid I just had words with," says I.

"Don't place him," says Loppy. "Never turned a flag for him, anyway. Why?"

"Oh, I'd kind of like to get a sketch of him," says I.

"That's easy," says Loppy. "Remember Scanlon, that used to be doorman at Headquarters?"

"Squint?" says I.

"Same one," says he. "Well, he's inside—one of the house detective squad. His night on, too. And say, if your man's one that hangs out here you can bank on Squint to give you the story of his life. Just step in and send a bell-hop after Squint. Say I want him."

And inside of two minutes we had Squint

with us. He remembers me too, and when he finds I'm an old friend of Whitey Weeks he opens up.

"Yes, I've seen that party around more or less," says he. "Creighton, eh? Well, he's no guest. Yes, I'm sure he don't room here. He just blew through the north exit. What's his line?"

"Antiques, he says," says I.

"Oh, sure!" says Squint. "Now I have him located. He's a free-lunch hitter; I remember one of the barkeeps grouching about him. But say, if you're after full details you ought to have a talk with Colonel Brassle. He knows him. And the Colonel ought to be strolling in from the Army and Navy Club soon. Want to wait?"

"Long as I've started this thing, I might as well stay with it," says I.

Yep, I waits for the Colonel. Some enthusiastic describer, Colonel Brassle is, when he gets going. It was near 1 A.M. when I finally tears myself away; but I'm loaded up with enough facts about Creighton to fill a book. And few of 'em was what you might call complimentary to Clyde. For one thing, his dear Alicia hadn't found him as inspirin' as he had her. Anyway, she'd complained a lot about his hang-over disposition, and finally quit him for good five or

six years before she passed on. Also, Clyde was no plute. He was existin' chiefly on bluff at present, and that studio of his was a rear loft over a delivery-truck garage down off Sixth Avenue. Then, there was other items just as interestin'.

But how I was goin' to get it all on record for Auntie I couldn't quite dope out. Anyway, there was no grand rush; it would keep. So I just lets things slide for a day or so. Maybe next Wednesday evenin' I'd have a chance to throw out a hint.

Then, here Tuesday afternoon I gets this trouble call from Vee. She's out at the corner drug store on the 'phone.

"It's about Auntie," says she. "She is acting so queerly."

"Any more so than usual?" I asks.

"She is going somewhere, and she hasn't told me a word about it," says Vee. "I found her traveling-bag, all packed, hidden under the hall-seat."

"The old cut-up!" says I. "What about Creighton—he been around lately?"

"Every afternoon and evening," says Vee. "He's to take her to a concert somewhere this evening. I'm not asked."

"Shows his poor taste," says I. "He's due there about eight o'clock, eh?"

"Seven-thirty," says Vee. "But I don't know what to think, Torchy—the traveling-bag and—"

"Don't bother a bit, Vee," says I. "Leave it to me. If it's Clyde at the bottom of this, I've as good as got him spiked to the track. Let Auntie pack her trunk if she wants to, and don't say a word. Give the giddy old thing a chance. It'll be all the merrier afterwards."

"But—but I don't understand."

"Me either," says I. "I'm a grand little guesser, though. And I'll be outside, in ambush for Clyde, from seven o'clock on."

"Will you?" says Vee, sighin' relieved. "But do be careful, Torchy. Don't—don't be reckless."

"Pooh!" says I. "That's my middle name. If I get slapped on the wrist and perish from it, you'll know it was all for you."

Course, it would have been more heroic if Clyde hadn't been such a ladylike gent. As it is, he's about as terrifyin' as a white poodle. So I'm still breathin' calm and reg'lar when I sees him rollin' up in a cab about seven-twenty-five. I'm at the curb before he can open the taxi door.

"Sorry," says I, "but I'm afraid it's all off."

"Eh?" says he, gawpin' at me.

"And you with your suit-case all packed

too," says I. "How provokin'! But they're apt to change their minds, you know."

"Do you mean," says he, "that—er—ah—"

"Something like that," I breaks in. "Anyway, you can judge. For, the fact is, some busybody has been gossipin' about your little trick of bawlin' out Alicia over the coffee and rolls and draggin' her round by the hair."

"Wha-a-at?" he gasps.

"You didn't mention the divorce, did you?" I goes on. "Nor go into details about your antique business? That Marie Antoinette dressin'-table game of yours, for instance. You know there is such a thing as floodin' the market with genuine Connecticut-made relics like that."

Gets him white about the gills, this jab does.

"Puppy!" he hisses out. "Do you insinuate that—"

"Not me," says I. "I'm too polite. But when you unload duplicates of the late Oliver Cromwell's writin'-desk you ought to see that both don't go to friends of Colonel Brassle. Messy old party, the Colonel, and I understand he's tryin' to induce 'em to make trouble. Course, you might explain all that to Auntie; but in her present state of mind— Eh? Must you be goin'? Any word to send up? Shall I tell her this wilt-thou date is postponed to—"

"Bah!" says Clyde, bangin' the taxi door shut and signalin' the chauffeur to get under way. I think I saw him shakin' his fist back at me as he drives off. So rough of him!

Upstairs I finds Auntie all in a flutter and tryin' to hide it. Vee looks at me inquirin' and anxious, but I chats on for a while just as if nothing had happened. Somehow, I was enjoyin' watchin' Auntie squirm. My mistake was in forgettin' that Vee was fidgety, too. No sooner has Auntie left the room, to send Helma scoutin' down to the front door, than I'm reminded.

"Ouch!" says I. Vee sure can pinch when she tries. I decides to report.

"Oh, by the way," says I, as Auntie comes back, "I just ran across Mr. Creighton."

"Yes?" says Auntie eager.

"He wasn't feelin' quite himself," says I. "Sudden attack of something or other. He didn't say exactly. But I expect that concert excursion is scratched."

"Scratched!" says Auntie, lookin' dazed.

"Canceled," says I. "Anyway, he went off in a hurry."

"But—but he was to have—" And there she stops.

"I know," says I. "Maybe he'll explain later, though."

No wonder she was dizzy from it, and it's quite natural that soon after she felt one of her bad headaches comin' on. So Vee and Helma got busy at once. After they'd tucked her away with the ice-bag and the smellin'-salts, she asked to be let alone; so durin' the next half hour I had a chance to tell Vee all about Creighton and his career.

"But he did seem so refined!" says Vee.

"You got to be," says I, "to deal in fake antiques. His mistake was in tacklin' something genuine"; and I nods towards a picture of Auntie.

"I don't see how I can ever tell her," says Vee.

"It would be a shame," says I. "Them late romances come so sudden. Why not just let her press it and put it away? Clyde will never come back."

"Just think, Torchy," says Vee, sort of snugglin' up. "If it hadn't been for you!"

"That's my aim in life," says I—"to prove I'm needed in the fam'ly."

CHAPTER IV

HOW HAM PASSED THE BUCK

I EXPECT you'll admit that when Mr. Robert slides out at 11 A.M. and don't show up again until after three he's stretchin' the lunch hour a bit. But, whatever other failin's I may have, I believe in bein' easy with the boss. So, when he breezes into the private office in the middle of the afternoon, I just gives him the grin, friendly and indulgent like.

"Well, Torchy," he calls over to me, "have I missed anyone?"

"Depends on how it strikes you," says I. "Mr. Hamilton Adams has near burned out the switchboard tryin' to get you on the 'phone. Called up four times."

"Ham, eh?" says he, shruggin' his shoulders careless. "Then I can hardly say I regret being late. I trust he left no message."

"This ain't your lucky day," says I. "He did. Wants to see you very special. Wants you to look him up."

"At the club, I suppose?" says Mr. Robert.

"No, at his rooms," says I.

"The deuce he does!" says Mr. Robert. "Why doesn't he come here if it's so urgent?"

"He didn't say exactly," says I, "but from hints he dropped I take it he can't get out. Sick, maybe."

"Humph!" says Mr. Robert, rubbin' his chin thoughtful. "If that is the case—" Then he stops and stares puzzled into the front of the roll-top, where the noon mail is sorted and stacked in the wire baskets.

I don't hear anything more from him for two or three minutes, when he signals me over and pulls up a chair.

"Ah—er—about Ham Adams, now," he begins.

"Say, Mr. Robert," says I, "you ain't never goin' to wish him onto me, are you? Why, him and me wouldn't get along a little bit."

"I must concede," says he, "that Mr. Adams has not a winning personality. Yet there are redeeming features. He plays an excellent game of billiards, his taste in the matter of vintage wines is unerring, and in at least two rather vital scrimmages which I had with the regatta committee he was on my side. And, while I feel that I have more than repaid any balance due— Well, I can't utterly ignore him now. But as for hunting him up this after-

noon—" Mr. Robert nods at the stacks of letters.

"Oh, all right," says I. "What's his number?"

Mr. Robert writes it on a card.

"You may as well understand my position," says he. "I have already invested some twenty-five hundred dollars in Mr. Adams' uncertain prospects. I must stop somewhere. Of course, if he's ill or in desperate straits— Well, here is another hundred which you may offer or not, as you find best. I am relying, you see, on your somewhat remarkable facility for rescuing truth from the bottom of the well or any other foolish hiding-place."

"Meanin', I expect," says I, "that you're after a sort of general report, eh?"

"Quite so," says Mr. Robert. "You see, it's a business errand, in a way. You go as a probing committee of one, with full powers."

"It's a tough assignment," says I, "but I'll do my best."

For I'd seen enough of Ham Adams to know he wa'n't the kind to open up easy. One of these bull-necked husks, Mr. Adams is, with all the pleasin' manners of a jail warden. Honest, in all the times he's been into the Corrugated general offices, I've never seen him give anyone but Mr. Robert so much as a nod. Always

marched in like he was goin' to trample you under foot if you didn't get out of his way, and he had a habit of scowlin' over your head like he didn't see you at all.

I expect that was his idea of keepin' the lower classes in their place. He was an income aristocrat, Ham was. Always had been. Phosphate mines down South somewheres, left to him by an aunt who had brought him up. And with easy money comin' in fresh and fresh every quarter, without havin' to turn a hand to get it, you'd 'most think he could take life cheerful. He don't, though. Hardly anything suits him. He develops into the club grouch, starin' slit-eyed at new members, and cultivatin' the stony glare for the world in general.

And then, all of a sudden, his income dries up. Stops absolutely. Something about not bein' able to ship any more phosphate to Germany. Anyway, the quarterly stuff is all off. I'd heard him takin' on about it to Mr. Robert —cussin' out the State Department, the Kaiser, the Allies, anybody he could think of to lay the blame to. Why didn't someone do something? It was a blessed outrage. What was one to do?

Ham's next idea seems to be who was one to do; and Mr. Robert, being handy, was tagged. First off it was a loan; a good-sized

one; then a note or so; and finally he gets down to a plain touch now and then, when Mr. Robert couldn't dodge.

But for a month or more, until this S. O. S. call comes in, he don't show up at all. So I'm some curious myself to know just what's struck him. I must say, though, that for a party who's been crossed off the dividend list for more'n a year, he's chuckin' a good bluff. Some spiffy bachelor apartments these are that I locates—tubbed bay trees out front, tapestry panels in the reception-room, and a doorman uniformed like a rear-admiral. I has to tell the 'phone girl who I am and why, and get an upstairs O. K., before I'm passed on to the elevator. Also my ring at B suite, third floor, is answered by a perfectly good valet.

"From Mr. Ellins, sir?" says he, openin' the door a crack.

"Straight," says I.

He swings it wide and bows respectful. A classy party, this man of Mr. Adams', too. Nothing down-and-out about him. Tuxedo, white tie, and neat trimmed siders in front of his ears. One of these quiet spoken, sleuthy movin' gents he is, a reg'lar stage valet. But he manages to give me the once-over real thorough as he's towin' me in.

"This way, sir," says he, brushin' back the

draperies and shuntin' me in among the leather chairs and Oriental rugs.

Standin' in the middle of the room, with his feet wide apart, is Mr. Adams, like he was waitin' impatient. You'd hardly call him sick abed. I expect it would take a subway smash to dent him any. But, if his man fails to look the part of better days gone by, Ham Adams is the true picture of a seedy sport. His padded silk dressin'-gown is fringed along the cuffs, and one of the shoulder seams is split; his slippers are run over; and his shirt should have gone to the wash last week. Also his chin is decorated in two places with surgeon's tape and has a thick growth of stubble on it. As I drifts in he's makin' a bum attempt to roll a cigarette and is gazin' disgusted at the result.

"Why didn't Bob come himself?" he demands peevish.

"Rush of business," says I. "He'd been takin' time off and the work piled up on him."

"Humph!" says Adams. "Well, I've got to see him, that's all."

"In that case," says I, "you ought to drop around about—"

"Out of the question," says he. "Look at me. Been trying to shave myself. Besides—Well, I can't!"

"Mr. Robert thought," I goes on, "that you might—"

"Well?" breaks in Mr. Adams, turnin' his back on me sudden and glarin' at the draperies. "What is it, Nivens?"

At which the valet appears, holdin' a bunch of roses.

"From Mrs. Grenville Hawks, sir," says he. "They came while you were at breakfast, sir."

"Well, well, put them in a vase—in there," says Ham. And as Nivens goes out he kicks the door to after him.

"Now, then," he goes on, "what was it Mr. Robert thought?"

"That you might give me a line on how things stood with you," says I, "so he'd know just what to do."

"Eh?" growls Ham. "Tell you! Why, who the devil are you?"

"Nobody much," says I. "Maybe you ain't noticed me in the office, but I'm there. Private sec. to the president of Mutual Funding. My desk is beyond Mr. Robert's, in the corner."

"Oh, yes," says Adams; "I remember you now. And I suppose I may as well tell you as anyone. For the fact is, I'm about at the end of my string. I must get some money somewhere."

"Ye-e-es?" says I, sort of cagey.

"Did Bob send any by you? Did he?" suddenly asks Adams.

"Some," says I.

"How much?" he demands.

"A hundred," says I.

"Bah!" says he. "Why, that wouldn't—See here; you go back and tell Bob I need a lot more than that—a couple of thousand, anyway."

I shakes my head. "I guess a hundred is about the limit," says I.

"But great Scott!" says Adams, grippin' his hands desperate. "I've simply got to—"

Then he breaks off and stares again towards the door. Next he steps across the room soft and jerks it open, revealin' the classy Nivens standin' there with his head on one side.

"Ha!" snarls Ham. "Listening, eh?"

"Oh yes, sir," says Nivens. "Naturally, sir."

"Why naturally?" says Adams.

"I'm rather interested, that's all, sir," says Nivens.

"Oh, you are, are you?" sneers Ham. "Come in here."

He ain't at all bashful about acceptin' the invitation, nor our starin' at him don't seem to get him a bit fussed. In fact, he's about the coolest appearin' member of our little trio.

Maybe some of that is due to the dead white of his face and the black hair smoothed back so slick. A cucumbery sort of person, Nivens. He has sort of a narrow face, taken bow on, but sideways it shows up clean cut and almost distinguished. Them deep-set black eyes of his give him a kind of mysterious look, too.

"Now," says Ham Adams, squarin' off before him with his jaw set rugged, "perhaps you will tell us why you were stretching your ear outside?"

"Wouldn't it be better, sir, if I explained privately?" suggests Nivens, glancin' at me.

"Oh, him!" says Adams. "Never mind him."

"Very well, sir," says Nivens. "I wanted to know if you were able to raise any cash. I haven't mentioned it before, but there's a matter of fifteen months' wages between us, sir, and—"

"Yes, yes, I know," cuts in Ham. "But you understand my circumstances. That will come in time."

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask for a settlement very soon, sir," says Nivens.

"Eh?" gasps Adams. "Why, see here, Nivens; you've been with me for five—six years, isn't it?"

"Going on seven, sir," says Nivens.

"And during all that time," suggests Ham, "I've paid you thousands of dollars."

"I've tried to earn it all, sir," says Nivens.

"So you have," admits Ham. "I suppose I should have said so before. As a valet you're a wonder. You've got a lot of sense, too. So why insist now on my doing the impossible? You know very well I can't lay my hands on a dollar."

"But there's your friend Mr. Ellins," says Nivens.

Ham Adams looks over at me. "I say," says he, "won't Bob stand for more than a hundred? Are you sure?"

"He only sent that in case you was sick," says I.

"You see?" says Ham, turnin' to Nivens. "We've got to worry along the best we can until things brighten up. I may have to sell off some of these things."

A cold near-smile flickers across Nivens' thin lips.

"You hadn't thought of taking a position, had you, sir?" he asks insinuatin'.

"Position!" echoes Ham. "Me? Why, I never did any kind of work—don't know how. Tell me, who do you think would give me a job at anything?"

"Since you've asked, sir," says Nivens, "why, I might, sir."

Ham Adams lets out a gasp.

"You!" says he.

"It's this way, sir," says Nivens, in that quiet, offhand style of his. "I'd always been in the habit of putting by most of my wages, not needing them to live on. There's tips, you know, sir, and quite a little one can pick up—commissions from the stores, selling second-hand clothes and shoes, and so on. So when Cousin Mabel had this chance to buy out the Madame Ritz Beauty Parlors, where she'd been forelady for so long, I could furnish half the capital and go in as a silent partner."

"Wha-a-at?" says Ham, his eyes bugged. "You own a half interest in a beauty shop—in Madame Ritz's?"

Nivens bows.

"That is strictly between ourselves, sir," says he. "I wouldn't like it generally known. But it's been quite a success—twelve attendants, sir, all busy from eleven in the morning until ten at night. Mostly limousine trade now, for we've doubled our prices within the last two years. You'll see our ads in all the theater programs and Sunday papers. That's what brings in the—"

"But see here," breaks in Ham, "how the

merry dingbats would you use me in a beauty parlor? I'm just curious."

Nivens pulls that flickery smile of his again.

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, sir," says he. "In fact, I have nothing to do with the active management of Madame Ritz's; only drop around once or twice a month to go over the books with Mabel. It's wonderful how profits pile up, sir. Nearly ten thousand apiece last year. So I've been thinking I ought to give up work. It was only that I didn't quite know what to do with myself after. I've settled that now, though; at least, Mabel has. 'You ought to take your place in society,' she says, 'and get married.' The difficulty was, sir, to decide just what place I ought to take. And then—well, it's an ill wind, as they say, that blows nobody luck. Besides, if you'll pardon me, sir, you seemed to be losing your hold on yours."

"On—on mine?" asks Ham, his mouth open.

Nivens nods.

"I'm rather familiar with it, you see," says he. "Of course, I may not fill it just as you did, but that would hardly be expected. I can try. That is why I have been staying on. I've taken over the lease. The agent has stopped bothering you, perhaps you have noticed. And I've made out a complete inventory of the fur-

nishings. In case I take them over, I'll pay you a fair price—ten per cent. more than any dealer."

"Do—do you mean to say," demands Adams, "that you are paying my rent?"

"Excuse me, mine," says Nivens. "The lease has stood in my name for the last two months. I didn't care to hurry you, sir; I wanted to give you every chance. But now, if you are quite at the end, I am ready to propose the change."

"Go on," says Ham, starin' at him. "What change?"

"My place for yours," says Nivens.

"Eh?" gasps Ham.

"That is, of course, if you've nothing better to do, sir," says Nivens, quiet and soothin'. "You'd soon pick it up, sir, my tastes being quite similar. For instance—the bath ready at nine; fruit, coffee, toast, and eggs at nine-fifteen, with the morning papers and the mail laid out. Then at—"

"See here, my man," breaks in Adams, breathin' hard. "Are you crazy, or am I? Are you seriously suggesting that I become your valet?"

Nivens shrugs his shoulders.

"It occurred to me you'd find that the easiest way of settling your account with me, sir,"

says he. "Then, too, you could stay on here, almost as though nothing had happened. Quite likely I should go out a bit more than you do, sir. Well, here you'd be: your easy chair, your pictures, your favorite brands of cigars and Scotch. Oh, I assure you, you'll find me quite as gentlemanly about not locking them up as you have been, sir. I should make a few changes, of course; nothing radical, however. And, really, that little back room of mine is very cozy. What would come hardest for you, I suppose, would be the getting up at seven-thirty; but with a good alarm clock, sir, you—"

"Stop!" says Ham. "This—this is absurd. My head's swimming from it. And yet— Well, what if I refuse?"

Nivens lifts his black eyebrows significant.

"I should hope I would not be forced to bring proceedings, sir," says he. "Under the Wage Act, you know—"

"Yes, yes," groans Ham, slumpin' into a chair and restin' his chin on his hands. "I know. You could send me to jail. I should have thought of that. But I—I didn't know how to get along alone. I've never had to, you know, and—"

"Precisely, sir," says Nivens. "And allow me to suggest that another employer might not have the patience to show you your duties.

But I shall be getting used to things myself, you know, and I sha'n't mind telling you. If you say so, sir, we'll begin at once."

Ham Adams gulps twice, like he was tryin' to swallow an egg, and then asks:

"Just how do—do you want to—to begin?"

"Why," says Nivens, "you might get my shaving things and lay them out in the bathroom. I think I ought to start by—er—dispensing with these"; and he runs a white hand over the butler siders that frames his ears.

Almost like he was walkin' in his sleep, Ham gets up. He was headed for the back of the suite, all right, starin' straight ahead of him, when of a sudden he turns and catches me watchin'. He stops, and a pink flush spreads from his neck up to his ears.

"As you was just sayin'," says I, "don't mind me. Anyway, I guess this is my exit cue."

I tries to swap a grin with Nivens as I slips through the door. But there's nothing doing. He's standin' in front of the mirror decidin' just where he shall amputate those whiskers.

First off Mr. Robert wouldn't believe it at all. Insists I'm feedin' him some fairy tale. But when I gives him all the details, closin' with a sketch of Ham startin' dazed for the

back bathroom, he just rocks in his chair and 'most chokes over it.

"By George!" says he. "Ham Adams turning valet to his own man! Oh, that is rich! But far be it from me to interfere with the ways of a mysterious Providence. Besides, in six months or so his income will probably be coming in again. Meanwhile— Well, we will see how it works out."

That was five or six weeks ago, and not until Tuesday last does either of us hear another word. Mr. Robert he'd been too busy; and as for me, I'd had no call. Still, being within a couple of blocks of the place, I thought I might stroll past. I even hangs up outside the entrance a few minutes, on the chance that one or the other of 'em might be goin' in or out, I'd about given up though, and was startin' off, when I almost bumps into someone dodgin' down the basement steps.

It's Ham Adams, with a bottle of gasoline in one hand and a bundle of laundry under his arm. Looks sprucer and snappier than I'd ever seen him before, too. And that sour, surly look is all gone. Why, he's almost smilin'.

"Well, well!" says I. "How's valetin' these days?"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" says he. "Why, I'm

getting along fine. Of course, I never could be quite so good at it as—as Mr. Nivens was, but he is kind enough to say that I am doing very well. Really, though, it is quite simple. I just think of the things I should like to have done for me, and—well, I do them for him. It's rather interesting, you know."

I expect I gawped some myself, hearing that from him. From Ham Adams, mind you!

"Ye-e-e-es; must be," says I, sort of draggy. Then I shifts the subject. "How's Mr. Nivens gettin' along?" says I. "Ain't married yet, eh?"

For a second Ham Adams lapses back into his old glum look.

"That is the only thing that worries me," says he. "No, he isn't married, as yet; but he means to be. And the lady—well, she's a widow, rather well off. Nice sort of person, in a way. A Mrs. Grenville Hawks."

"Not the one that used to send you bunches of roses?" says I.

He stares at me, and then nods.

"It seems that Mr. Nivens had already picked her out—before," says he. "Oh, there was really nothing between us. I'd never been a marrying man, you know. But Mrs. Hawks—well, we were rather congenial. She's bright, not much of a highbrow, and not quite in the

swim. I suppose I might have— Oh, widows, you know. Told me she didn't intend to stay one. And now Mr. Nivens has come to know her, in some way; through his cousin Mabel, I suppose. Knows her quite well. She telephones him here. I—I don't like it. It's not playing square with her for him to— Well, you see what I mean. She doesn't know who he was."

"Uh-huh," says I.

"But I'm not sure just what I ought to do," says he.

"If you're callin' on me for a hunch," says I, "say so."

"Why, yes," says he. "What is it?"

"What's the matter," says I, "with beating him to it?"

"Why—er—by Jove!" says Ham. "I—I wonder."

He was still standin' there, holdin' the gasoline bottle and gazin' down the basement steps, as I passed on. Course, I was mostly joshin' him. Half an hour later and I'd forgot all about it. Never gave him a thought again until this mornin' I hears Mr. Robert explode over something he's just read in the paper.

"I say, Torchy," he sings out. "You remember Ham Adams? Well, what do you think he's gone and done now?"

"Opened a correspondence school for valets?" says I.

"Married!" says Mr. Robert. "A rich widow, too; a Mrs. Grenville Hawks."

"Zippo!" says I. "Then he's passed the buck back on Nivens."

"I—er—I beg pardon?" says Mr. Robert.

"You see," says I, "Nivens kind of thought an option on her went with the place. He had Ham all counted out. But that spell of real work must have done Ham a lot of good—must have qualified him to come back. Believe me, too, he'll never be the same again."

"That, at least, is cheering," says Mr. Robert.

CHAPTER V

WITH ELMER LEFT IN

ALL I can say is that it was a busy day at the Corrugated. Course, I might go into details, just as I might put mustard in my coffee, or lock Piddie in the bond safe. Neither of them performances would be quite so fruity as for me to give out particulars about this special directors' meetin' that was goin' on. Speakin' by and large, though, when you clean up better'n thirty per cent. on a semi-annual, you got to do some dividend-jugglin', ain't you? And with them quiz committees so thick, it's apt to be ticklish work.

Anyway, Old Hickory has chewed up four brunette cigars the size of young baseball bats, two of the Board have threatened to resign, and a hurry call has just been sent out for our chief counsel to report, when Mr. Robert glances annoyed towards the door. It's nobody but fair-haired Vincent, that has my old place on the gate, and he's merely peekin' in timid, tryin' to signal someone.

"For heaven's sake, Torchy," says Mr.

Robert, "see what that boys wants. I've already waved him away twice. Of course, if it is anything important—"

"I get you," says I, passing over to him the tabulated reports I'd been sittin' tight with. Then I slips out to where Vincent is waitin'.

"Buildin' on fire?" says I.

"Why, no, sir," says he, goin' bug-eyed.

"Oh!" says I. "Then who you got waitin' out there—Secretary Daniels or the Czar of Russia?"

Vincent pinks up like a geranium and smiles shy, like he always does when he's kidded. "If you please, sir," says he, "it's only a lady; to see Mr. Mason, sir."

"Huh!" says I. "Lady trailin' old K. W. here, eh? Must be one of the fam'ly."

"Oh no, sir," says Vincent. "I'm quite sure it isn't."

"Then shunt her, Vincent," says I. "For you can take it from me, K. W. is in no mood to talk with stray females at the present writing. Shoo her."

"Ye-e-e-es, sir," says he; "but—but I wish you would see her a moment yourself, sir."

"If it's as bad as that," says I, "I will."

Pretty fair judgment Vincent has too, as a rule, even if he does look like a mommer's boy. Course, he can't give agents and grafters the

quick back-up, like I used to. He side-tracks 'em so gentle, they go away as satisfied as if they'd been invited in; and I don't know but his method works just as well. It ain't often they put anything over on him, either.

So I'm surprised and grieved to see what's waitin' for one of our plutiest directors outside the brass rail. In fact, I almost gasps. Lady! More like one of the help from the laundry. The navy blue print dress with the red polka dots was enough for one quick breath, just by itself. How was that for an afternoon street costume to blow into the Corrugated general offices with on a winter's day? True, she's wearin' a gray sweater and what looked like a man's ulster over it; but there's no disguisin' the fact that the droopy-brimmed black sailor was a last summer's lid. Anyway, the whole combination seems to amuse the lady typists.

This party of the polka dots, though, don't seem to notice the stir she's causin', or don't mind if she does. A slim, wiry young female she is, well along in the twenties, I should say. What struck me most about her was the tan on her face and hands and the way her hair was faded in streaks. Sort of a general outdoor look she had, which is odd enough to see on Broadway any time of year.

"Was it you askin' for Mr. Mason?" says I, beginnin' to suspect that Vincent had made a mistake, after all.

"Yes indeed, suh," says she, sort of soft and slurry. "Ahm th' one. You jess tell him Valentina Tozier's out hea-uh. He'll know."

"Oh, will he?" says I, a bit sarcastic. Sorry, Valentina, but I couldn't think of disturbin' Mr. Mason now. Maybe you don't know it, but he's a mighty busy man."

"Well, there!" says she. "Think of that!"

Then I knew why it was Vincent had taken a chance on crashin' into a directors' meetin'. He'd been hypnotized by Miss Tozier's smile. It ain't any common open-faced movement, believe me. It's about the friendliest, most natural heart-to-heart smile I ever got in range of. And, somehow, it seems to come mostly from the eyes; a chummy, confidential, trustin' smile that sparkles with good faith and good nature, and kind of thrills you with the feelin' that you must be a lot better'n you ever suspected. Honest, after one application I forgets the queer rig she has on, the mud-colored hair, and the way her chest slumps in. Whoever she might be and whatever she might want, I'm strong for givin' her the helpin' hand. If I could have gone in and led old K. W. out by the arm, I'd have done it. But

you couldn't have pulled him away from that Board scrap with a donkey-engine. He was unloadin' a ten months' grouch against some of Old Hickory's pet policies, Mr. Mason was, and he was enjoyin' himself huge, even if he did know he was due to be steam-rollered when the vote was taken.

"See here, Miss Tozier," says I, "it wouldn't do you a bit of good to see Mr. Mason now. He's all lathered up and frothin' at the mouth. But in an hour or so he'll be calmed down, maybe before. I tell you what; you stroll out and take in the store windows for a spell and then drift back later. Come up here if you like, or you can wait in the arcade and nail him as he comes down the elevator."

She thanks me real folksy, pats Vincent on the shoulder, and starts for the corridor with a long, easy swing that some of these barefoot poem dancers couldn't execute to save their necks.

"Huh!" says I to Vincent. "Put the spell on us, didn't she?"

All through the rest of that messy session I'd glance now and then at K. W. and wonder where and how he ever happened to meet up with Valentina. I was meanin' to pass him the word how she was waitin' to see him; but

after he'd registered his big howl, and Old Hickory had first smeared him and then soothed him down, he left so sudden that I didn't have a chance.

Besides, I was some rushed myself. There was a lot of odds and ends to be tied up after the meetin', and two or three of them resolutions that was jammed through called for quick action early next day. That's what kept me and Piddie and Mr. Robert doin' so much overtime. About six o'clock we had coffee and sandwiches sent in, and it must have been well after seven before we locked the big safes and called it a day. Piddie had already beat it to catch a late train to Jersey, so there was only the two of us that dodged the scrubwomen on our way down to the street.

Mr. Robert had a taxi waitin' to take him to the club, and I was debatin' whether I needed a reg'lar dinner or not, when I gets a glimpse of someone leanin' patient against a pillar opposite the main elevator exit.

"Sufferin' sisters!" says I. "Valentina!"

"I beg pardon?" says Mr. Robert.

"Say," says I, "help me put a smilin' party on the track of K. W. Mason, will you? Here she is."

I expect Mr. Robert would have ducked if he could, after one view of the polka-dot dress

and the rusty straw lid; but there was Valentina comin' straight at us.

"For the love of Mike!" says I. "You ain't been waitin' all this time, have you?"

"Right hea-uh," says she. "Ah reckon Ah done missed him."

"Why," says I, "Mr. Mason left hours ago. Must be something important you want to see him about, eh?"

"Ah don't know as it is," says she; "only Ah promised, ef ever Ah got to Noo Yawk, Ah'd look him up. He made me. And Ah sure would like to see Warrie mahself."

"Warrie!" says I. "Oh, gosh! Why, you mean young Mr. Mason—Warren, don't you?"

She nods.

"Well, say, that's too bad," says I. "My fault, though. But I never thought of Warrie as the one. Why, he hasn't been with the Corrugated for over a year now."

I might have added that we'd had hard work missin' him at any time. Not that he wasn't all right in his way, but—well, it was just a case of bein' more ornamental than useful. A bit thick in the head, Warrie. But it was a stunnin' head—reg'lar Apollonaris Belvidere. He had wavy brown hair, and big, peaceful brown eyes. Stood a little over six feet too, and they say that when it came to ridin' a

spotted pony and swingin' a polo mallet he was all there. But in the bond department he was just under foot.

So, when he develops rheumatism in one shoulder and a specialist orders him South, it wasn't any serious jolt to the business world. And when he finally shows up again it didn't take much urgin' from Mr. Robert to induce him to pass up his financial career for good. He was engaged to be married anyway, and that should have been enough to occupy his mind.

Where he'd run across Valentina was the big puzzle, and the easiest way to solve it was to ask her. Which I does.

"Why, at Sand Spur Point," says she.

"Sounds cute," says I. "Is it on the map?"

"It's on mine," says Valentina.

"Sand Spur, did you say?" puts in Mr. Robert. "Isn't that the place he discovered when he was sent South to bake out his shoulder? Florida, isn't it?"

"West coast," says Valentina.

"Of course," says Mr. Robert. "He talked a lot about it. Seemed to have grown rather fond of the people there."

"We all thought a heap of Warrie," says Miss Tozier, lettin' loose that mesmerizin' smile of hers.

Mr. Robert gets the full force of it, for he'd been lookin' her over sort of curious; and blamed if he don't fall for it 'most as hard as me and Vincent.

"By George!" says he. "I'm sure Warrie would feel badly if he missed seeing anyone from Sand Spur. You must let me know where you're stopping. I'll send him word."

"Wouldn't do a bit of good in the world," says Valentina, "for Ah'm not stopping anywhere. You see, Ah come up with pop on a lumber-schooner, and we'll be headed out past Sandy Hook by sunrise."

"Can't we locate Warrie to-night some way?" I asks.

Mr. Robert shrugs his shoulders.

"We can," says he. "I happen to know where he is at this moment." Then he whispers, "Dining at the Tarleton; Miss Prentice is with him."

"Gee!" says I.

Maybe you've seen pictures of this young society queen that's annexed Warrie? I had. That's why I took such a long breath before askin', "Would you take a chance?"

"Eh?" says Mr. Robert.

Then, as the idea strikes in, he develops that eye twinkle.

"Why," he goes on, "I see no serious ob-

jection. Surely she might spare him for five minutes. Yes, of course. You may have my taxi if you'll drop me at the club first. Let's do it."

So that's how I come to be interviewin' a chesty head waiter at the Tarleton twenty minutes later. From where I stood I could see Warrie Mason well enough, but I has to write out a message and have it taken in. Him and Miss Prentice are havin' dinner all by themselves, and they sure make a swell-lookin' pair. Warrie he looks classy in anything, but in evenin' clothes he's a reg'lar young grand duke; while Miss Prentice—well, she's one of these soft, pouty-lipped, droopy-eyed charmers, the kind you see bein' crushed against some manly shirt bosom on the magazine covers. I watches her nod careless as Warrie explains what's in the note, and the next minute he's out givin' me the cordial hail.

"What!" says he. "A friend from Sand Spur? By Jove! It—it can't be Valentina, can it?"

"She's the one," says I. "Goin' back early in the mornin' too, so I didn't know but you might like to step out and—"

"Step out nothing!" says he. "Bring her in. There's only Gladys, and we're just starting dinner. I want you both to join us."

"Wha-a-at?" I gasps. "Lug Valentina—in there!"

"Most certainly," says he.

"But see here, you big boob," says I, "have you got any idea how she's costumed?"

He laughs. "Let's see," he goes on, "it ought to be a dark blue print with red polka dots. That used to be her Sunday dress."

"You win," says I. "The styles in Sand Spur ain't changed any. But this is Fifth Avenue, remember."

"Torchy," says he, droppin' one of his big paws on my shoulder, "what I shall always remember about Valentina Tozier is this: that when she picked me up out on the Gulf I was in a bad way. I'd been rolling around in a rummy old motor-boat for hours and hours, with a stalled engine, and a norther howling down the coast. Came sailing out in a crazy catboat, Valentina did, and towed me in. She knew nothing about who I was, mind you, but that made no difference to her or Pop Tozier. From then on there wasn't anything in Sand Spur too good for me. And now—but where is she?"

Honest, in all I'd seen of him at the Corrugated, I'd never known Warrie Mason to act so much like a live one. There was no stopping

"For a second it looked like Gladys was goin' to freeze with horror; but she just gives Valentina the once-over and indulges in a panicky little giggle."

him. Before I could register any more protests, he'd hauled Valentina out of the cab, taken her by the arm, and was steerin' her slam into the middle of the Tarleton's Looie Cans dinin'-room. The haughty head waiter lets out one gasp and steadies himself against a marble pillar. As for Miss Prentice, she takes one look at what Warrie is towin' in, and goes pink in the ears. Then she stiffens, from the jaws down.

But Warrie don't seem to be wise to the fact that he's pullin' anything odd. He acts just as natural as if he'd picked up one of the younger set.

"Gladys," says he, "this is Valentina Tozier, that I've told you so much about. Valentina, I want you to know Miss Prentice."

"Ah!" says Gladys, a bit choky and archin' her eyebrows sarcastic. "I—I recall the name."

You'd 'most thought Valentina would have been fussed to flinders about then; but, beyond actin' a little dazed, she don't show it. She lets a couple of French waiters peel off the faded ulster and the gray sweater, and, believe me, when the whole of that polka-dot costume is revealed she's some conspicuous. For a second it looked like Gladys was goin' to freeze with horror; but, after givin' Valentina the

once-over, she just lifts her shoulders a trifle and indulges in a panicky little giggle.

Of the two of 'em, I will say that Valentina takes it easier, for that dinner dress of Miss Prentice's must have jarred her some. But Valentina only stares for a minute, and then manages to work up one of them friendly smiles.

Warrie don't get any of this by-play at all. Soon as he's through shootin' orders to the waiter, he turns to Valentina. "Well, well!" says he enthusiastic. "This is a treat. Did you come up by train or steamer?"

"Schooner," says Valentina. "You know all that cypress you saw 'em yankin' out of the swamp back of the Point? Well, suh, it's lumber now, every stick. Sold, too. That's what me and pop came up for."

"You don't say!" says Warrie. "How much?"

"Near nine thousand," says she.

"Whe-e-e-ew!" says Warrie. "Now I suppose you'll be moving into Tampa."

"No," says Valentina; "we're fixin' to buy another swamp."

Then they both laughed, like it was some huge joke.

"But how is everyone?" goes on Warrie. "Uncle Jake still going out after stone-crabs?"

"Every mornin'," says Valentina. "And they're runnin' fine this winter, too. He put near a bushel on the schooner before we sailed. We had 'em all the way up."

"M-m-m-m!" says Warrie, smackin' his lips. "Remember the ones we roasted that day?"

"'Deed I do," says she. "You didn't want to try 'em at first."

"Wasn't I all kinds of a chump, though?" says he. "And that first chicken pillau you made! Say!

"You know," says Warrie, turnin' to Gladys, "it was Valentina who actually knocked out that rheumatism of mine. Did it with Green Springs water and fresh limes. Awful dose! But inside of two weeks she had me rowing a boat."

"Really!" says Gladys, smotherin' a yawn.

"Don't you believe him, Miz Prentice," protests Valentina. "It was just livin' a month in Sand Spur. That would cure anyone of anything."

"Sand Spur!" echoes Gladys. "It must be a wonderful place."

Valentina and Warrie swaps grins.

"It's a dozen shacks strung along two snaky wagon ruts through the sand," says Valentina, "a few pines and live-oaks, a whole heap of

razor-backs, and us Crackers dodgin' between. That's Sand Spur."

"Oh, a little more than that," breaks in Warrie. "You forget the roses and the yellow jasmine climbing over the shacks, the Spanish moss festooning the oaks, the mocking-birds singing from every tree-top, the black cypress behind the pines, and out front the jade-green Gulf where the sun goes down so glorious. You forget the brilliant mornings and the wonderful soft moonlight nights."

Well, that's the way them two went on, like a couple of kids talkin' over a summer vacation. I gathered that Warrie had simply quit the sanatorium where he'd been played for a good thing, and settled down in Sand Spur with the Toziers; gettin' fat on the weird dishes Valentina could cook, and havin' the time of his life. Seems as if he'd made friends with the whole population, for he had to ask about all of 'em by their front names.

Listenin' to 'em was sort of interestin' to me, but Miss Prentice don't conceal the fact that she's bored stiff. Meanwhile we was wadin' through a first-class feed. And about nine o'clock Valentina announces that she'll have to be gettin' back to the schooner or pop'll be worried. Warrie says he'll send her down in a cab, and asks me if I'll go along to see that

she gets there safe, which I says I will. She was bein' helped into the ulster when Warrie remembers someone else in Sand Spur.

"Oh, by the way," says he; "what about Elmer?"

Valentina laughs easy.

"Oh, he's the same Elmer," says she. "He's still foreman out at the swamp."

"Comes over every Sunday night as usual, eh?" asks Warrie.

She nods. "Wednesdays now, too," says she.

"Then," says Warrie, "you and Elmer are to—er—"

"Ah reckon," says Valentina. "Sometime this spring."

"Well, well!" says Warrie. Then, as kind of an afterthought, he holds out his hand. "My best wishes for you both," says he.

"Thanks," says Valentina, and gives him about half a smile. Next she glances towards Gladys. "Say," she goes on, "is—is she the one?"

"Yes," says Warrie.

"Same to you," says Valentina. "Good-by."

They shook hands once more—sort of a long, lingerin' shake, with their eyes steady to each other; and then—well, then I steers Valentina

out past the grinnin' cloak-room boys and stows her in the taxi. She didn't have much to say on the way down. Nor I. And, take it from me, it's some ride from the Tarleton down to Pier 9, East River.

First thing next mornin', Mr. Robert wants to know how the reunion passed off, and he listens bug-eyed as I describes the way we rung in on the dinner-party with Gladys.

"The deuce you did!" says he. "Just like Warrie to do that, though. But, if I know Miss Prentice at all, she will pay him back for that little prank."

"Now you've said something!" says I.

"And Valentina," he adds reflectively, "is on her way back to Sand Spur, is she?"

"I expect that's where she belongs," says I; "and yet—"

"Well, yet what?" demands Mr. Robert, sort of quizzin'.

"I was only thinkin'," says I, "that if the cards could have been shuffled different, with Gladys startin' in Sand Spur and Valentina on the Avenue, Warrie might not have so many yawns comin' to him across the dinner-table. But then, maybe Elmer of the Swamp deserves some lucky breaks. Who knows?"

CHAPTER VI

A BALANCE FOR THE BOSS

You see, I was openin' the mornin' mail. Hope you get that part. Not that I want to seem chesty over it. Just goes to show, that's all. For, of the whole force here at the General offices, there's just three of us can carve up the mornin' mail without gettin' fired for it. And the other two are Old Hickory and Mr. Robert.

H-m-m-m! Business of lookin' important. That's what it is to be a private sec. But, between you and me, this slicin' and sortin' envelopes ain't such thrillin' work; mostly routine stuff—reports of department heads, daily statements from brokers, and so on. Now and then, though, you run across something rich. This was one of the times.

I was 'most through the pile when I comes to this pale pink affair with a heavy wax seal on the back. Perfumed, too, like lilacs. First off I thought it must be private, and I held the letter stabber in the air while I took a closer look. No. It's addressed just to the Corru-

gated Trust. So rip she goes. After I'd read it through twice I grins and puts it one side. When Mr. Robert blows in I hands the pink one to him first.

"We're discovered," says I. "Here's someone that hints polite how we're a bunch of strong-arms organized to rob the widow and orphan of their daily bread."

Mr. Robert takes one sniff, then holds it at arm's length while he runs it through. Gets a chuckle out of him, too.

"It's rather evident," says he, "that Mrs. Theodore Bayly Bagstock doesn't approve of us at all—though just why is not quite clear."

"That's easy," says I. "This Inter-Lake Navigation that she's beefin' about was one of them little concerns we gathered in last fall. Paid something like fourteen, and our common at three and a half don't seem so good to her, I expect. Still, she got a double on her holdin's by the deal, and with the melon we're goin' to cut next month—"

"Suppose, Torchy," breaks in Mr. Robert, tossing back the letter, "you answer the lady in your own direct and lucid way. You might suggest that we are neither highwaymen nor the Associated Charities, using any little whim of sarcasm that occurs to you."

I'd just thought out a real snappy come-back

too, and was dictatin' it to a stenographer, when Old Hickory happens to drift by with his ear out. He stops short.

"Hold on," says he. "What Mrs. Bagstock is that?"

"Why, the peevish one, I expect, sir," says I.

"Let's see that letter," says he.

I passes it over.

"Huh!" he goes on, rubbin' his chin reminiscent. "I wonder if that could be—er—young man, I think I'll answer this myself."

"Oh, very well, sir," says I, shruggin' my shoulders careless.

Must have been half an hour later when Old Hickory calls me into the private office, and I finds him still gazin' at the scented note.

"Torchy," says he, glancin' keen at me from under his bushy eyebrows, "this Mrs. Bagstock seems to think we are using her badly. As a matter of fact, those Inter-Lake shareholders were lucky. We might have frozen them out altogether. You understand, eh?"

I nods.

"But I can't put that in a letter," he goes on. "It could be explained in a personal interview, however."

"I get you," says I. "I'll 'phone for her to come around."

"No!" he roars. "You'll do nothing of the sort. What the rhythmic rhomboids put that into your head? I don't want to see the woman. I'll not see her, not on any pretext. Understand?"

"I think so," says I.

"Then get your hat," says he.

"Yes, sir," says I, edgin' out.

"Just a moment," says Old Hickory. "You are to explain to Mrs. Bagstock fully: assure her that in the long run she will not be the loser, and so on. As courteously as you know how. And—er—if in the course of the interview you should happen to learn her given name—er—just remember it."

"Such as Ella May or Josephine?"

"No!" he snaps. "Natalie. Now clear out."

Ain't he the foxy old pirate, though? Sendin' me off on a sleuthin' expedition without givin' up a hint as to what it's all about! Was it some back-number romance that this lilac-dipped note had reminded him of? More likely there'd been some Bagstock or other who'd double-crossed him in a deal and he'd never found a chance to get square. Anyway, he's after a confidential report, so off I pikes.

My troubles began right at the start. I had to hunt the address up on a city map, and when I'd located it on the lower West Side, down in

the warehouse district, I'm sure of one thing —this Mrs. Bagstock can't be such-a-much. If I had any doubts they was knocked out by the sign hung alongside the front door— "Furnished Rooms."

I expect it had been quite a decent old house in its day—one of these full-width brick affairs, with fancy iron grill-work on either side of the brownstone steps and a fan-light over the door. There was even an old-fashioned bell-pull that was almost equal to a wall exerciser for workin' up your muscle. I was still pumpin' away energetic, not hearin' any results inside, when the door is jerked open, and a perky young female with the upper part of her face framed in kid curlers and a baby-blue boudoir cap glares at me unpleasant.

"Humph!" says she. "Tryin' to play 'Rag-Time Temple Bells,' are you?"

"Then I did register a tinkle, did I?" says I.

"Tinkle! More like a riot call," says she. "Want to look at rooms?"

"Not exactly," says I. "You see, I'm representin'—"

"Are you?" she crashes in crisp. "Well, say, you fresh agents are goin' to overwork this comedy cut-up act with our bell one of these times. Go on. Shoot it. What you want

to wish on us—instalment player-piano, electric dish-washer, magazine subscriptions, or—"

"Excuse me," I cuts in, producin' the letter; "but, while you're a grand little guesser, your start is all wrong. I came to see Mrs. Bagstock about this. Lives here, don't she?"

"Oh, Auntie?" says the young party in the boudoir cap. "Then I guess you can come in. Now, lemme see. What's this all about? H-m-m-m! Stocks, eh? Just a jiffy while I go through this."

Durin' which I've been shooed into the parlor. Some parlor it is, too. I don't know when I've seen a room that came so near whinin' about better days gone by. Every piece of furniture, from the threadbare sofa to the rickety center table, seems kind of sad and sobby.

Nothing old-timey about this young female that's studyin' out Mrs. Bagstock's letter. Barrin' the floppy cap, she's costumed zippy enough in what I should judge was a last fall's tango dress. As she reads she yanks gum industrious.

"Say," she breaks out, "this is all Dutch to me. Who's bein' called down, anyway?"

"We are," says I. "The Corrugated Trust. I'm private sec. there. I've come around to show Mrs. Bagstock where she's sized us up

wrong, and if I could have five minutes' talk with her—"

"Well, you can't, that's all," says the young lady. "So speed up and tell it to me."

Course, I wasn't doin' that. We holds quite a debate on the subject without my scorin' any points at all. She tells me how she's a niece by marriage of Mrs. Bagstock, and the unregrettin' widow of the late Dick McCloud, who up to a year ago was the only survivin' relative of his dear aunt.

"And he wasn't much good at that, if I do say it," announces Tessie, snappin' her black eyes. "I don't deny he had me buffaloed for a while there, throwin' the bull about his rich aunt that was goin' to leave him a fortune. Huh! This is the fortune—this old furnished-room joint that's mortgaged up to the eaves and ain't had a roomer in three months. Hot fortune, ain't it? And here I am stranded with a batty old dame, two blocks below Christopher."

"Waitin' to inherit?" I asks innocent.

"Why not?" says Tessie. "I stood for Dick McCloud 'most three years. That ought to call for some pension, hadn't it? I don't mind sayin', too, it ain't one long May-day festival, this bein' buried alive with Aunt Nutty."

"Meanin' Mrs. Bagstock?" says I.

She nods. "One of Dick's little cracks," says she. "Her real name is Natalie."

I expect my ears did a reg'lar rabbit motion at that. So this was the one? Well, I'd got to have a look at her!

"Eh?" says I. "Did you say Natalie?"

"Aunt Nutty's a better fit, though," says Tessie.

"Ah, come!" says I. "She don't write so batty. And anybody who can notice the difference between fourteen per cent. dividends and three and a half ain't so far gone."

"Oh, you never could work off any wooden money on her," admits Tessie. "Her grip on a dollar is sump'n fierce; that is, until it comes to settin' the stage for one of her third Wednesdays."

"Her which?" says I.

"If it was anything I could cover up," says Tessie, "you bet I'd deny it. But anybody on the block could put you wise. So, if you must know, every third Wednesday Aunt Nutty goes through the motions of pullin' off a pink tea. Uh-huh! It's all complete: the big silver urn polished up and steamin', sandwiches and cakes made, flowers about, us all dolled up—and nobody to it! Oh, it's a scream!"

"But don't anyone come?" says I.

"Hardly," says Tessie, "unless you count

Mrs. Fizzenmeyer, the delicatessen lady; or Madame Tebeau, the little hairdresser; or the Schmitt girls, from the corner bakery. They pretend to take Auntie almost as serious as she takes herself. Lately, though, even that bunch has stopped. You can't blame 'em. It may be funny for once or twice. After that—well, it begins to get ghastly. Specially with the old girl askin' me continual to watch out the window and see if the Van Pyles haven't driven up yet, or the Rollinses, or the Pitt-Smiths. If that ain't nutty, now what is?"

"The third Wednesday, eh?" says I. "That's to-morrow, ain't it?"

"Sure," says Tessie. "Which is why you can't see her to-day. She's in trainin' for the big event—y'understand?"

"But I'd like to set her mind easy on this stock proposition," says I.

"Wish you could," says Tessie. "She's been stewin' a lot over something or other. Must be that. And I could take you up to her if you was on the list."

"What list?" I asks.

"Her doctor, her solicitor, her banker," says Tessie, checkin' 'em off on her fingers.

"Say," says I, "couldn't I ring in as one of her bankers? Then I could get this off my chest and not have to come again."

"I'll put it up to her," says Tessie. "Got a business card on you?"

I had, an engraved one. Maybe that's what did the trick, for Tessie comes back smilin'.

"But it'll take me half an hour or so to fix her up," says she. "She's dreadful fussy about her looks."

"I got all day," says I.

But at that it seemed like I'd been shut up in that sobby parlor for a month when Tessie finally gives me the word. "Come along," says she. "And don't forget to make a noise like a banker."

Say, after I'd been led up to this faded old relic that's bolstered with pillows in the arm-chair by the window, and listened to her wavery, cracked voice, I couldn't see anything funny in it at all.

It's a vague, batty sort of talk we had. Mostly it's a monologue by her.

"I am quite annoyed," says she, tappin' the chair arm with her thin, blue-white finger-nails. "My income, you know. It must not be reduced in this way. You must attend to it at once. Those Inter-Lake securities. I've depended on those. Mr. Bagstock gave them to me on our fifth wedding anniversary. Of course, I am not a business woman. One can't neglect one's social career. But I have always

tried to look after my own securities. My father taught me to do that when I was a mere girl. So I wrote about my Inter-Lake Navigation shares. Why should your firm interfere? You say in a few months they will pay as well. But meanwhile? You see, there are my Wednesdays. I can't give them up. What would people say? For years that has been my day. No, no, young man; you must find a way. Tell your firm that I simply must keep up my Wednesdays."

And, as she stops for breath, it's about the first chance I've had to spring anything on her. Old Hickory hadn't told me not to use his name, and was I to blame if he'd overlooked that point?

"Yes'm," says I; "I'll tell Mr. Ellins."

"Who?" says she, steadyin' her wanderin' gaze. "Mr. Ellins?"

"Old Hickory," says I. "He's president of the Corrugated Trust, ma'am."

"Really!" says she. "How odd! I—I used to know a young man of that name—a pushing, presuming, impudent fellow. In fact, he had the audacity to call on me several times. He was quite impossible socially; uncouth, awkward, rough spoken. A mere clerk, I believe. And I—well, I was rather a belle that season, I suppose. At least, I did not lack suitors. A

brilliant season it was for me too, my first. Our dinners, receptions, dances, were affairs of importance. How this raw Middle-Westerner came to be invited I've forgotten. Through my father, I presume. I had hardly noticed him among so many. At least, I am sure I never gave him an excuse for thinking that he could— Oh, it was outrageous. I had been trying to dance with him and had given it up. We were in the little conservatory, watching the others, when—well, I found myself in his arms, crushed there. He—he was kissing me violently. I suppose I must have screamed before I fainted. Anyway, there was a scene. He was given his hat and coat, shown the door. Father was in a rage. Of course, after that he was ostracized. I never saw him again, never forgave him. And now— Do you think this can be the same Mr. Ellins? He sent you to me, did he not? Did he mention anything about—"

"Not a word except business," says I. "And I must say that performance don't sound much like the boss."

"Ah!" says the old girl, sighin' relieved. "I am glad to hear you say so. I should not care to have any dealings with him."

She was back in the '70's again, tryin' to look haughty and indignant. Next minute she

was protestin' about her income and announcin' that she must keep up her Wednesdays.

"Yes'm," says I, backin' out; "I'll tell him."

"Well?" says Tessie, as we gets back to the parlor. "Ain't that some bug-house proposition? Got an ear-full, didn't you? And tomorrow we'll— There's that fool bell again. Oh, it's the doctor. I'll have to take him up. So long."

She let the young doctor in as she let me out. I was half way down the block, too, when I turns and walks back. I waits in the tin runabout until the pill distributer comes out.

"What about the old lady in there?" says I. "Kind of wabbly, ain't she?"

"Oh, she may last a month more," says he. "Wonderful vitality. And then again —oh, any time; like that!" and he snaps his fingers.

Maybe I didn't have some details to give Old Hickory.

"It's a case of better days," says I. "Must have been some society queen and she's never got over the habit. Still playin' the game."

Then I describes the guestless teas she has. But never a smile out of Old Hickory. He listens grim without interruptin'.

"But what about her first name?" he asks at last.

"Oh, sure," says I. "Didn't I mention that? Natalie. And I expect she was some stunner. She's near the finish now, though. Shouldn't wonder but to-morrow might be her last third Wednesday."

"Who says so?" demands Mr. Ellins savage.

"Her doctor," says I.

With that, Old Hickory bangs his fist on the desk.

"Then, by the Lord Harry," says he, I'd like to make it a good one."

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'.

"Young man," says he, "I don't know whether you have had fool luck or have been particularly clever, but thus far you have handled this affair for me like a diplomat. Now I'm going to ask you to do something more. I don't care to hear another word about Mrs. Bagstock, not a whisper, but—er—here's a check for two hundred dollars. No, I'll make it five. Just take that and see that her silly tea to-morrow is a bang-up affair, with plenty of real guests."

I gasps.

"But, I say, Mr. Ellins," I begins, "how do I—"

"Don't ask me how, young man," he snaps. "What do I know about tea-parties? Do as I tell you."

Say, that's some unique order to shoot at a private sec., ain't it?

And did I make good? Listen. Before nine o'clock that night I had the thing all plotted out and half a dozen people gettin' busy. Course, it's mostly Vee's program. She claps her hands when she hears the tale.

"Why, Torchy!" says she. "Isn't that just splendid! Certainly we can do it."

And when Vee gets enthusiastic over anything it ain't any flash in the pan. It's apt to be done, and done right. She tells me what to do right off the reel. And you should have seen me blowin' that five hundred like a drunken sailor. I charters a five-piece orchestra, gives a rush order to a decorator, and engages a swell caterer, warnin' Tessie by wire what to expect. Vee tackled the telephone work, and with her aunt's help dug up about a dozen old families that remembered the Bagstocks. How they hypnotized so many old dames to take a trip 'way downtown I don't know; but after Mrs. Tessie McCloud had watched the fourth limousine unload from two to three classy-lookin' guests, she near swallowed her gum.

"Muh Gawd!" says she. "Am I seein' things, or is it true?"

Not only dames, but a sprinklin' of old sports

in spats and frock-coats and with waxed white mustaches was rounded up; and, with five or six débutantes Vee had got hold of, it's some crusty push.

First off Mrs. Bagstock had been so limp and unsteady on her pins that she'd started in by receivin' 'em propped up in a big chair. But by the time the old parlor got half full and the society chatter cuts loose she seems to buck up a lot.

Next thing I knew, she was standin' as straight as a Fifth Avenue doorman, her wrinkled old chin well up and her eyes shinin'. Honest, she was just eatin' it up. Looked the part, too. A bit out of date as to costume, maybe; but with her white hair piled up high and the diamond-set combs in it, and a cameo as big as a door-knob at her throat, and with that grand-duchess air of hers, hanged if she don't carry it off great. Why, I heard her gossipin' with old Madam Van Pyle as chummy and easy as if it had been only last week since they'd seen each other, instead of near twenty years ago.

Havin' to pay off some of the help, I had to stick around until it was all over. So I was there when she staggers towards Tessie and leans heavy on her shoulder.

"They—they've all gone, haven't they?" she

asks. "I—I'm so tired and—and so happy! It has been the most successful Wednesday I've had for some time, hasn't it?"

"Has it?" says Tessie. "Why, Auntie, this was a knockout, one of the kind you read about. Honest, even when I was fittin' corsets for the carriage trade, I never got so close to such a spiffy bunch. But we had the goods to hand 'em—caviar sandwiches, rum for the tea, fizz in the punch. Believe me, the Astors ain't got anything on us now."

Mrs. Bagstock don't seem to be listenin'. She's just gazin' around smilin' vague.

"Music, wasn't there?" she goes on. "I had really forgotten having ordered an orchestra. And such lovely roses! Let me take one more look at the dear old drawing-room. Yes, it was a success, I'm sure. Now you may ring for my maid. I—I think I will retire."

As they brushed past me on their way to the stairs I took a chance on whisperin' to Tessie.

"Hadn't you better ring up the doc.?" I suggests.

"Maybe I had," says she.

Perhaps she did, too. I expect it didn't matter much. Only I was peeved at that boob society editor, after all the trouble I took to get the story shaped up by one of my newspaper friends and handed in early, to have it

held over for the Sunday edition. That's how it happens the paper I takes in to Mr. Ellins Monday mornin' has these two items on the same page—I'd marked 'em both. One was a flossy account of Mrs. Theodore Bayly Bagstock's third Wednesday; the other was six lines in the obituary column. Old Hickory reads 'em, and then sits for a minute, gazin' over the top of his desk at nothing at all.

"Poor Natalie!" says he, after a while. "So that was her last."

"Nobody ever finished any happier, though," says I.

"Hah!" says he. "Then perhaps that balances the account."

Saying which, he clips the end off of a fat black perfecto, lights up, and tackles the mornin' mail.

CHAPTER VII

TORCHY FOLLOWS A HUNCH

It was a case of local thunderstorms on the seventeenth floor of the Corrugated Trust Building. To state it simpler, Old Hickory was runnin' a neck temperature of 210 or so, and there was no tellin' what minute he might fuse a collar-button or blow out a cylinder-head.

The trouble seemed to be that one of his pet schemes was in danger of being ditched. Some kind of an electric power distributin' stunt it is, one that he'd doped out durin' a Western trip last summer; just a little by-play with a few hundred square miles of real estate, includin' the buildin' of twenty or thirty miles of trolley and plantin' a few factories here and there.

But now here's Ballinger, our Western manager, in on the carpet, tryin' to explain why it can't be done. He's been at it for two hours, helped out by a big consultin' engineer and the chief attorney of our Chicago branch. They've waved blue-print maps, submitted reports of experts, and put in all kinds of evi-

dence to show that the scheme has either got to be revised radical or else chucked.

"Very sorry, Mr. Ellins," says Ballinger, "but we have done our best."

"Bah!" snaps Old Hickory. "It's all waste land, isn't it? Of course he'll sell. Who is he, anyway?"

"His name," says Ballinger, pawin' over some letters, "is T. Waldo Pettigrew. Lives in New York, I believe; at least, his attorneys are here. And this is all we have been able to get out of them—a flat no." And he slides an envelope across the mahogany table.

"But what's his reason?" demands Old Hickory. "Why? That's what I want to know."

Ballinger shrugs his shoulders. "I don't pretend," says he, "to understand the average New Yorker."

"Hah!" snorts Mr. Ellins. "Once more that old alibi of the limber-spined; that hoary fiction of the ten-cent magazine and the two-dollar drama. Average New Yorker! Listen, Ballinger. There's no such thing. We're just as different, and just as much alike, as anybody else. In other words, we're human. And this Pettigrew person you seem to think such a mysterious and peculiar individual—well, what about him? Who and what is he?"

"According to the deeds," says Ballinger, "he is the son of Thomas J. and Mary Ann Pettigrew, both deceased. His attorneys are Mott, Drew & Mott. They write that their client absolutely refuses to sell any land anywhere. They have written that three times. They have declined to discuss any proposition. And there you are."

"You mean," sneers Old Hickory, "that there you are."

"If you can suggest anything further," begins Ballinger, "we shall be glad to—"

"I know," breaks in Old Hickory, "you'd be glad to fritter away another six months and let those International Power people jump in ahead of us. No, thanks. I mean to see if I can't get a little action now. Robert, who have we out there in the office who's not especially busy? Oh, yes, Torchy. I say, young man! You—Torchy!"

"Calling me, sir?" says I, slidin' out of my chair and into the next room prompt.

Old Hickory nods.

"Find that man Pettigrew," says he, tossin' over the letter. "He owns some land we need. There's a map of it, also a memorandum of what we're willing to pay. Report to-morrow."

"Yes, sir," says I. "Want me to close the deal by noon?"

Maybe they didn't catch the flicker under them bushy eyebrows. But I did, and I knew he was goin' to back my bluff.

"Any time before five will do," says he. "Wait! You'd better take a check with you."

If we was lookin' to get any gasps out of that bunch, we had another guess comin'. They knew Old Hickory's fondness for tradin' on his reputation, and that he didn't always pull it off. The engineer humps his eyebrows sarcastic, while Ballinger and the lawyer swaps a quiet smile.

"Then perhaps we had best stay over and take the deeds back with us," says Ballinger.

"Do," snaps Old Hickory. "You can improve the time hunting for your average New Yorker. Here you are, Torchy."

Say, he's a game old sport, Mr. Ellins. He plays a hundred-to-one shot like he was puttin' money on a favorite. And he waves me on my way with never a wink of them keen eyes.

"Gee!" thinks I. "Billed for a masked marvel act, ain't I? Well, that bein' the case, this is where I get next to Pettigrew or tear something loose."

Didn't need any seventh-son work to locate him. The 'phone book shows he lives on Madison Avenue. Seemed simple enough. But this was no time to risk bein' barred out by a

cold-eyed butler. You can't breeze into them old brownstone fronts on your nerve. What I needed was credentials. The last place I'd be likely to get 'em would be Mott, Drew & Mott's, so I goes there first. No, I didn't hypnotize anybody. I simply wrote out an application for a job on the firm's stationery, and as they was generous with it I dashes off another note which I tucks in my pocket. Nothing sleuthy required. Why, say, I could have walked out with the letter file and the safe combination if I'd wanted to.

So when I rings the bell up at Mr. Pettigrew's I has something besides hot air to shove at Perkins. He qualifies in the old fam'ly servant class right off, for as soon as he lamps the name printed on the envelope corner he swings the door wide open, and inside of two minutes I'm bein' announced impressive in the library at the back: "From your attorneys, sir." Which as far as it goes is showin' some speed, eh?

Yea-uh! That's the way I felt about it. All I asked was to be put next to this Pettigrew party. Not that I had any special spell to work off on him; but, as Old Hickory said, he must be human, and if he was, why— Well, about then I begun to get the full effect of this weird, double-barreled stare.

Now, I don't mind takin' the once-over from a single pair of shell-rimmed goggles; but to find yourself bein' inspected through two sets of barn windows—honest, it seemed like the room was full of spectacles. I glanced hasty from one to the other of these solemn-lookin' parties ranged behind the book barricade, and then takes a chance that the one with the sharp nose and the dust-colored hair is T. Waldo.

"Mr. Pettigrew?" says I, smilin' friendly and winnin'.

"Not at all," says he, a bit pettish.

"Oh, yes," says I, turnin' to the broken-nosed one with the wavy black pompadour effect. "*Of* course."

He's some younger than the other, in the late twenties, I should judge, and has sort of a stern, haughty stare.

"Why of course?" he demands.

"Eh?" says I. "Why—er—well, you've got my note, ain't you, there in your hand?"

"Ah!" says he. "Rather a clever deduction; eh, Tidman?"

"I shouldn't say so," croaks the other. "Quite obvious, in fact. If it wasn't me it must be you."

"Oh, but you're such a deucedly keen chap," protests Waldo. Then he swings back to me. "From my attorneys?"

"Just came from there," says I.

"Odd," says he. "I don't remember having seen you before."

"That's right," says I. "You see, Mr. Pettigrew, I'm really representin' the Corrugated Trust and—"

"Don't know it at all," breaks in Waldo.

"That's why I'm here," says I. "Now, here's our proposition."

And say, before he can get his breath or duck under the table, I've spread out the blueprints and am shootin' the prospectus stuff into him at the rate of two hundred words to the minute.

Yes, I must admit I was feedin' him a classy spiel, and I was just throwin' the gears into high-high for a straightaway spurt when all of a sudden I gets the hunch I ain't makin' half the hit I hoped I was. It's no false alarm, either. T. Waldo's gaze is gettin' sterner every minute, and he seems to be stiffenin' from the neck down.

"I say," he breaks in, "are—are you trying to sell me something?"

"Me?" says I. "Gosh, no! I hadn't quite got to that part, but my idea is to give you a chance to unload something on us. This Apache Creek land of yours."

"Really," says Waldo, "I don't follow you at all. My land?"

"Sure!" says I. "All this shaded pink. That's yours, you know. And as it lays now it's about as useful as an observation car in the subway. But if you'll swap it for preferred stock in our power company—"

"No," says he, crisp and snappy. "I owned some mining stock once, and it was a fearful nuisance. Every few months they wanted me to pay something on it, until I finally had to burn the stuff up."

"That's one way of gettin' rid of bum shares," says I. "But look; this is no flimflam gold mine. This is sure-fire shookum—a sound business proposition backed by one of the—"

"Pardon me," says T. Waldo, glarin' annoyed through the big panes, "but I don't care to have shares in anything."

"Oh, very well," says I. "We'll settle on a cash basis, then. Now, you've got no use for that tract. We have. Course, we can get other land just as good, but yours is the handiest. If you've ever tried to wish it onto anyone, you know you couldn't get a dollar an acre. We'll give you five."

"Please go away," says he.

"Make it six," says I. "Now, that tract measures up about—"

"Tidman," cuts in Mr. Pettigrew, "could you manage to make this young man understand that I don't care to be bothered with such rot?"

Tidman didn't have a chance.

"Excuse me," says I, flashin' Old Hickory's ten thousand dollar check, "but if there's anything overripe about that, just let me know. That's real money, that is. If you want it certified I'll—"

"Stop," says T. Waldo, holdin' up his hand like I was the cross-town traffic. "You must not go on with this silly business chatter. I am not in the least interested. Besides, you are interrupting my tutoring period."

"Your which?" says I, gawpin'.

"Mr. Tidman," he goes on, "is my private tutor. He helps me to study from ten to two every day."

"Gee!" says I. "Ain't you a little late gettin' into college?"

Waldo sighs weary.

"If I must explain," says he, "I prefer to continue improving my mind rather than idle away my days. I've never been to college or to any sort of school. I've been tutored at home ever since I can remember. I did give it up for a time shortly after the death of my father. I thought that the management of the

estate would keep me occupied. But I have no taste for business—none at all. And I found that by leaving my father's investments precisely as they came to me my affairs could be simplified. But one must do something. So I engaged Mr. Tidman. What if I am nearly thirty? Is that any reason why I should give up being tutored? There is so much to learn! And to-day's period is especially interesting. We were just about getting to Thorwald the Bitter."

"Did you say Biter or Batter?" says I.

"I said Thorwald the Bitter," repeats Pettigrew. "One of the old Norse Vikings, you know."

"Go on, shoot it," says I. "What's the joke?"

"But there's no joke about it," he insists. "Surely you have heard of the Norse Vikings?"

"Not yet," says I. "I got my ear stretched, though."

"Fancy!" remarks T. Waldo, turnin' to Tidman.

Tidman stares at me disgusted, then hunches his shoulders and grunts, "Oh, well!"

"And now," says Pettigrew, "it's nearly time for Epictetus."

Sounded something like lunch to me, but I

wasn't takin' any hints. I'd discovered several things that Waldo didn't care for, money being among 'em, and now I was tryin' to get a line on what he did like. So I was all for stickin' around.

"Possibly," suggests Tidman, smilin' sarcastic, "our young friend is an admirer of Epictetus?"

"I ain't seen many of the big games this year," says I. "What league is he in?"

"Epictetus," says Waldo, breakin' it to me as gentle as he can, "was a Greek philosopher. We are reading his 'Discourses.'"

"Oh!" says I. "Not so close, was I? Now, what was his line of dope—something like the Dooley stuff?"

Waldo and Tidman swaps grins, sort of sly and sheepish, like they wasn't used to indulgin' in such frivolity. They seemed to enjoy it, though, and the first thing I know I'm bein' put through a sort of highbrow third degree, the object being to show up what an empty loft I wear my pink thatch on.

Course, they didn't have to dig very deep into back-number hist'ry or B. C. best sellers to prove their case, and when an extra chuckle was needed I admit I played up my part for all it was worth. Honest, they develops into a pair of reg'lar cut-ups, and seems to be havin'

the time of their lives discoverin' that I thought Cleopatra must be one of the Russian ballet and Francis Bacon a new movie star.

"And yet," says Waldo, inspectin' me curious, "your employers intrust you with a ten thousand dollar check."

"They've never got onto me, the way you have," says I.

"As I have always contended," puts in Tidman, "the commercial mind is much overrated. Its intelligence begins with the dollar sign and ends with a percentage fraction. In England, now, we—"

"Well, Peters?" breaks in T. Waldo, glancin' annoyed towards the double doors, where the butler is teeterin' back and forth on his toes.

"If you please, sir," says Peters, registerin' deep agitation, "might I have a word with you in—er—in private, sir?"

"Nonsense, Peters," says Waldo. "Don't be mysterious about silly housekeeping trifles. What is it? Come, speak up, man."

"As you like, sir," goes on Peters. "It—it's about the laundress, sir. She's sitting on a man in the basement, sir."

"Wha-a-at?" gasps Waldo.

Tidman takes it out by droppin' a book.

"A dangerous character, we think, sir," says the butler—"most likely one of a gang of bur-

glars. Mrs. Flynn found him lurking in the coal-bin on account of his having sneezed, sir. Then she grappled him, sir."

"Oh, dear!" groans Tidman, his face goin' putty-colored.

"The deuce!" says Waldo. "And you say the laundress has him—er—"

"Quite secure, sir," says Peters. "Both hands in his hair and she sitting on his chest, sir."

"But—but this can't go on indefinitely," says Waldo. "I suppose something ought to be done about it."

"I should suggest sending for the police, sir," says Peters.

"Bother!" says Waldo. "That means my going to police court, and having the thing in the papers, and— Why, Tidman, what's the matter?"

The tutor sure was takin' it hard. His thin, bony fingers are clutchin' the chair arm desperate, clammy drops are startin' out on his brow, and his narrow-set eyes are starin' at Peters.

"She's such a heavy female—Mrs. Flynn," groans Tidman. "Right on his chest, too!"

"Better that than having him wake us up in the middle of the night flourishing firearms and demanding valuables," says Waldo.

"Ugh! Burglars. How—how silly of them to come here! It's so disturbing, and I do dread having the police in. I wish you wouldn't look so ghastly over it, Tidman. Come, suggest something."

But Tidman don't seem to be a good suggester. "Both hands in his hair. Oh!" he mutters.

"It's not your hair," sputters Waldo. "And saying idiotic things like that doesn't help. Not a bit. Must I call the police, or what?"

"The police!" whispers Tidman, hoarse and husky.

"But what else can I do?" demands Waldo. Then he turns to me. "I say, can you think of anything?"

"Seems to me I'd have a look at the gent first," says I. "Mistakes sometimes happen, you know, in the best regulated basements. Might be just a man takin' the meters, or a plumber, or something like that."

"By George, that's so!" says T. Waldo, chirkin' up. "But—er—must I go down there? Suppose he should be a burglar, after all?"

"We'd be three to one, not countin' Mrs. Flynn," says I.

"Would you help, really?" he asks eager. "You see, I'm not very strong. And Tidman

—well, you can't count much on him. Besides, how does one know a burglar by sight?"

"They don't wear uniforms, that's a fact," says I; "but I might ask him what he was doin' down there and call for proof. Then, if he was only takin' the meter, why—"

"Of course," says Waldo. "We will—er—you'll do that for me, will you not? Come along, Tidman. You too, Peters. We'll just find out who the fellow is."

I must say, it's kind of a draggy rush line they formed, Tidman havin' to be almost pushed, and Peters keepin' well in the rear. I finds myself leadin' the assault, with Waldo a bad second, but tellin' me which turns to make and urgin' Tidman to follow close.

Sure enough, though, there on the laundry floor we discovers the victorious Mrs. Flynn, a wide, husky party, with something flattened underneath. About all that's visible is a pair of run-over shoes and part of a coat sleeve that's been ripped off. She seems glad to see us.

"Thanks be!" says she, sighin' grateful. "It's faint and wake I am strugglin' with this murderous little shrimp. Ah, squirm, will ye! There's men to handle ye now, and the coppers'll soon be here. Will ye take charge of him, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"No, no! Please, Mrs. Flynn!" protests Waldo. "You are doing excellently. Don't let him up just yet."

"O-o-o-o!" moans the flattened gent. "My poor back!"

"If you could ease up a bit, so we might get a look at him," I suggests. "We want to see if he's really a burglar."

"He's that, all right," says Mrs. Flynn. "Didn't I catch him red-handed prowlin' about? But if ye want to see what his ugly mug looks like, ye may. There! Sit ye up and face the gintlemen!"

She's a shifty party with her hands and feet, for with a couple of body twists Mrs. Flynn is on her knees behind him with his arms pinned to the small of his back.

"There, thief of the wor-ruld!" says she. "Tell 'em whatever you came to steal."

"Go on," says I. "Mind the lady."

"I—I'm no thief; really, gentlemen," says he. "You can see that, I trust."

"Sure!" says I. "Just mistook the basement for the drawin'-room, didn't you? And you was about to leave cards on the fam'ly. What name did you say?"

"I—I'd rather not give my name," says he, hangin' his head.

"It's being done in the best circles," says I.

"These calls incog. are gettin' to be bad form. Isn't that right, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"If he is a gas man or a plumber," says Waldo, "why doesn't he say so at once?"

"There's your cue," says I. "Now come across with the alibi."

"I—I can't explain just how I happen to be here," says the gent, "but—but there are those who can."

"Eh?" says I. "Oh-ho!"

It was only a quick glance he shot over, but I caught who it was aimed at. Also, I noticed the effect. And just like that I had a swift hunch how all this ground-floor mix-up might be worked in useful.

"Mr. Pettigrew," says I, "suppose I could Sherlock Holmes this laundry mystery without callin' in the cops?"

"Oh, I should be so grateful!" says T. Waldo.

"That ain't the answer," says I. "Would it make you feel different about sellin' that land?"

"Oh, I say, you know!" protests T. Waldo, startin' to stiffen up.

For a two-by-four he lugs around a lot of cranky whims, and it looked like this was one of his pets. There's quite a mulish streak in him, too.

"All right," says I, startin' towards the basement stairs. "Settle it your own way."

"But, really, I—I don't know what to do," says Waldo. "I—I'm all upset. Of course, if you insist on the land—"

"That's talkin'!" says I. "My guess is that it won't take long. Suppose you and Peters go back upstairs. You can leave Tidman, though."

"You—you're sure it is safe?" asks Waldo.

"Look at that grip of Mrs. Flynn's," says I.

After one skittish glance, Waldo does a quick exit. At that, though, Peters beat him to it.

"Tidman," says I, when they're gone, "we'll step out towards the back a ways and consult. Hold him a minute longer, Mrs. Flynn."

"I—I don't see why I should be dragged into this," whines Tidman, as I leads him towards the rear.

"Never mind," says I. "We're goin' to clear this all up right away. Now, who is he, Tidman? Black-sheep brother, or what?"

Got a jump out of him, that jab did. But he recovers quick.

"Why, he's no relative at all," says Tidman. "I assure you that I never saw the—"

"Naughty, naughty!" says I. "Didn't I spot

that peaked beak of his, just like yours? That's a fam'ly nose, that is."

"Cousin," admits Tidman, turnin' sulky.

"And sort of a blot on the escutcheon?" I goes on.

Tidman nods.

"Booze or dope?" I asks.

"Both, I think," says Tidman. "He—he has almost ruined my career."

"Pulls the Black Hand stuff on you, eh?" says I.

Tidman groans.

"I lost two positions because of him," says he. "It is only when he gets desperate that he hunts me up. I hadn't seen him for over two years until this morning. I'd been out for a walk, and he must have followed me. We were in the front vestibule, and he was begging, as usual,—threatening, too,—when I saw Mr. Pettigrew coming in. So I hurried Ralph through the hall and downstairs. I thought he could stay there until I was through tutoring; then I could give him something and send him off. But that Mrs. Flynn—"

"She's a swell short-stop," says I. "Doin' extra duty, too. Got a couple of fives on you?"

"Why, ye-e-es," says Tidman; "but what—"

"You're goin' to reward her for sittin' on

Cousin Ralph so long," says I. "Give her one of the fives. You can slip the other to him as we shoo him through the back door. Now, let's go relieve Mrs. Flynn."

From the rough way we collared Ralph and led him off, she must have thought we was headin' him straight for Sing Sing. Anyway, that five-spot kept her mind busy.

Our remarks to Ralph were short but meaty.

"You see the bally muss you got me into, I hope," says Tidman.

"And just remember," I adds, "when the fit strikes you to call again, that Mrs. Flynn is always on hand."

"She's a female hyena, that woman," says Cousin Ralph, rubbin' his back between groans. "I—I wouldn't get within a mile of her again for a fortune."

Couldn't have been more'n ten minutes before the three of us—Waldo, Tidman, and me—was all grouped in the lib'ry again, just as though nothing had happened.

"My hunch was right," says I. "He wasn't a burglar. Ask Tidman."

Tidman backs me up hearty.

"Then who the deuce was he," demands Waldo, "and what was he—"

"Now, say!" says I. "You've been let out, ain't you? He's gone; no police, no court pro-

ceedin's, no scandal in the servants' quarters. Ain't that enough?"

"You're quite right," says Waldo. "And we still have time for that chapter of—"

"So you have," says I; "only you got to ditch this Toothpicketus work until you sign an order to your lawyers about sellin' that land. Here, lemme draft it off for you. Twelve words. Likely they'll want an O. K. on the 'phone, too; but you won't mind that. Now your signature. Thanks. And say, any time you and Tidman need a crude commercial mind to help you out, just send for me."

Uh-huh! By three o'clock next day we owned the whole of that Apache Creek tract and had the goods to shove at Ballinger.

Was it a smear? It was—a smear plus. Tickled? Why, Old Hickory came so near smilin' I was afraid that armor-plate face of his was goin' to crack.

But say, don't tell the National Real Estaters' League about that commission check he slipped me. I might lose my amateur standin'.

CHAPTER VIII

BREAKING ODD WITH MYRA

NEXT time I'll pay attention. For Vee must have mentioned how this Cousin Myra of hers was comin'. Yes, I remember now. Said something about her being an old-maid niece of Auntie's who was due to drift in from Bermuda or California or somewhere, and that she might stay over a few days.

But it was no solemn warnin', as it had a right to be. So, by the time I gets this sudden hunch the other night about runnin' up for a little unlisted chat with Vee, I must have forgotten. Not one of my reg'lar evenin's, you understand, nor any special date: I was just takin' a chance. And when the maid tells me Miss Vee and Auntie have gone out for an after-dinner stroll on the Drive, I chucks my new felt-rim straw on the hall table and remarks careless that, as Auntie ain't likely to do any Marathon before bedtime, I guess I'll wait.

Helma grins. "Mees Burr, she in bookrary, yes," says she.

"Oh!" says I. "The cousin? That'll be all the better. Good chance for me to be gettin' in right with her. Tell her what to expect, Helma.

That's the sort of social plunger I am—regular drawin'-room daredevil, facin' all comers, passin' out the improvised stuff to strangers, and backin' myself strong for any common indoor event. That is, I was until about 8:13 that evenin'. Then I got in range of them quick-firin' dart throwers belongin' to Miss Myra Burr.

Say, there's some people that shouldn't be allowed at large without blinders on. Myra's one. Her eyes are the stabby kind, worse than long hatpins. Honest, after one glance I felt like I was bein' held up on a fork.

"Ouch!" says I, under my breath. But she must have heard.

"I beg pardon," says she. "Did you say something?"

"Side remark to my elbow," says I. "Must have caught the doorcasing as I came through. Excuse it."

"Oh!" says she. "You are the young man who dances such constant attendance on Verona, are you?"

"That's a swell way of puttin' it," says I. "And I suppose you're the—er—"

"I am Miss Burr," says she. "Verona is my cousin."

"Well, well!" says I. "Think of that!"

"Please don't reflect on it too hard," says she, "if you find the fact unpleasant."

"Why—er—" I begins, "I only meant—ah— Don't let me crash in on your readin', though."

Her thin lips flatten into a straight line—the best imitation of a smile she can work up, I expect—and she turns down a leaf in her magazine. Then she shifts sudden to another chair, where she has me under the electrolier, facin' her, and I knows that I'm let in for something. I could almost hear the clerk callin', "Hats off in the courtroom."

Odd, ain't it, how you can get sensations like that just from a look or two? And with dimmers on them lamps of hers Myra wouldn't have scared anybody. Course, her nose does have sort of a thin edge to it, and her narrow mouth and pointed chin sort of hints at a barbed-wire disposition; but nothing real dangerous.

Still, Myra ain't one you'd snuggle up to casual, or expect to do any hand-holdin' with. She ain't costumed for the part, for one thing. No, hardly. Her idea of an evenin' gown seems to be to kick off her ridin'-boots and pin

on a skirt. She still sticks to the white neck-stock; and, the way her hair is parted in the middle and drawn back tight over her ears, she's all fixed to weather a gale. Yes, Myra has all the points of a plain, common-sense female party just taggin' thirty-five good-by.

Not that I puts any of them comments on the record, or works 'em in as repartee. Nothing like that. I may look foolish, but there are times when I know enough not to rock the boat. Besides, this was Myra's turn at the bat; and, believe me, she's no bush-leaguer.

"H-m-m-m!" says she, givin' me the up-and-down inventory. "No wonder you're called Torchy. One seldom sees hair quite so vivid."

"I know," says I. "No use tryin' to play it for old rose, is there? All I'm touchy about is havin' it called red."

"For goodness' sake!" says she. "What shade would you call it?"

"Why," says I, "I think it sounds more refined to speak of it as pink plus."

But Myra seems to be josh-proof.

"That, I presume," says she, "is a specimen of what Aunt Cornelia refers to as your unquenchable impertinence."

"Oh!" says I. "If you've been gettin' Auntie's opinion of me—"

"I have," says Myra; "and, as a near relative of Verona's, I trust you'll pardon me if I seem a bit critical on my own part."

"Don't mind me at all," says I. "You don't like the way I talk or the color of my hair. Go on."

She ain't one to be led anywhere, though.

"I understand," says Myra, "that you come here two or three evenings a week."

"That's about the schedule," says I.

"And just why?" demands Myra.

"It's more or less of a secret," says I; "but there's always a chance, you know, of my havin' a cozy little fam'ly chat like this. And when that don't happen—well, then I can talk with Vee."

Miss Burr's mouth puckers until it looks like a slit in a lemon.

"To be perfectly frank," says she, "I think it unutterably silly of Aunt Cornelia to allow it."

"I can see where you're goin' to be a great help," says I. "Stayin' some time, are you?"

"That depends," says Myra—and the way she snaps at me is almost assault with intent to maim. "I suppose," she goes on, "that you and Verona are quite as insufferable as young people usually are. Tell me; do you sit in corners and giggle?"

"Not as a rule," says I, "but it looks like we would."

"At me, I presume?" says Myra. "Very well; I accept the challenge."

And say, she's no prune-fed pacifist, Cousin Myra. Course, she don't swing the hammer quite so open when the folks get back, for Vee ain't one you can walk on with hobnails and get away with it. I guess Myra suspicioned that. But, when it comes to sly jabs and spicy little side remarks shot in casual, Miss Burr lives up to her last name.

"Oh, yes!" says she, when they tries to introduce us reg'lar. "We have become well acquainted—very."

"How nice!" says Vee, sort of innocent.

"I am glad you think so," says Myra.

And for the rest of the evenin' she confines her remarks to Auntie, cuttin' loose with the sarcasm at every openin' and now and then tossin' an explosive gas bomb at us over Auntie's shoulder. Nothing anyone could grab up and hurl back at her, you know. It's all shootin' from ambush. Some keen tongue she has, take it from me. At 9:30 I backed out under fire, leavin' Vee with her ears pinked up and a smolderin' glow in them gray eyes of hers.

If it hadn't been for puttin' myself in the

quitter class I'd laid off Sunday night. But I just couldn't do that. So we stands another siege. No use tryin' to describe it. Cousin Myra's tactics are too sleuthy. Just one jab after another, with them darnin'-needle eyes addin' the fine touches.

But this time Vee only smiles back at her and never answers once. Why, even Auntie takes up a couple of Myra's little slams and debates the point with her enthusiastic. Nothing from Vee, though. I don't understand it a bit until it's all over, and Vee follows me out into the hall and helps me find my hat. Quite careless, she shuts the door behind us.

"Whew!" says I. "Some grouch, Cousin Myra! What is it—shootin' pains in the disposition?"

Vee snickers. "Did you mind very much, Torchy?" she asks.

"Me?" says I. "Oh, I was brought up on roasts—never knew much else. But, I must say, I was gettin' a bit hot on your account."

"Don't," says she. "You see, I know all about Cousin Myra—why she's like that, I mean."

"On a diet of mixed pickles and sour milk, is she?" says I—"or what?"

No, it wasn't anything so simple as that.

It was a case of a romance that got ditched. Seems that Myra'd been engaged once. No idle seashore snap runnin' from Fourth of July to Labor Day, but a long-winded, year-to-year affair. The party of the second part was one Hinckley, a young highbrow who knew so much that it took the college faculty a long time to discover that he was worth more'n an assistant bartender and almost as much as a fourth-rate movie actor. Then, too, Myra's father had something lingerin' the matter with him, and wouldn't let anybody manage him but her. Hymen hobbled by both hind feet, as you might say.

They was keepin' at it well, though, each bearin' up patient and waitin' for the happy day, when Myra's younger sister came home from boardin'-school and begun her campaign by practisin' on the Professor, just because he happened to be handy. She was a sweet young thing with cheek dimples and a trilly laugh, and—well, you can guess the rest. Only, when little sister has made a complete hash of things, she skips merrily off and marries a prominent 'varsity quarter-back who has water on the knee and the promise of a nine-dollar-a-week job in uncle's stove works.

Course, Myra really should have made it up

when Professor Hinckley finally does come crabbin' around with another ring and a sad-eyed alibi. But she wouldn't—not her. Besides, father had begun takin' mud baths and experimentin' with climates.

So for eight or ten years she went driftin' around here and there, battlin' with room clerks and head waiters, hirin' and firin' nurses, packin' trunks every month or so, and generally enjoyin' the life of a health hunter, with her punctured romance trailin' further and further behind her. Even after father had his final spell and the last doctor's bill was paid off, Myra kept on knockin' around, claimin' there wouldn't be any fun makin' a home just for herself. Why not? Her income was big enough, so she didn't have to worry about rates. All she asked was a room and bath somewhere, and when the season changed she moved on. She'd got so she could tell you the bad points about every high-priced resort hotel from Catalina to Bar Harbor, and she knew so many veranda bores by sight that she could never shake all of 'em for more'n a day or so at a time.

"No wonder she's grown waspy, living a life like that," says Vee.

"Ain't there any way of our duckin' this continuous stingfest, though?" says I.

"There is something I'd like to try," says Vee, "if you'll promise to help."

"If it's a plan to put anything over on Miss Burr," says I, "you can count on me."

"Suppose it sounds silly?" says Vee.

"Comin' from you," says I, "it couldn't."

"Blarney!" says Vee. "But you've said you'd help, so listen; we'll give a Myra day."

"A which?" says I.

"Come here while I whisper," says she.

I expect that's why it don't sound more'n half nutty, too, delivered that way. For with Vee's chin on my shoulder, and some of that silky straw-colored hair brushin' my face, and a slim, smooth arm hooked chummy through one of mine—well, say; she could make a tabulated bank statement listen like one of Grantland Rice's baseball lyrics. Do I fall for her proposition? It's almost a jump.

"All right," says I. "Not that I can figure how it's goin' to work out, but if that's your idea of throwin' the switch on her, I'm right behind you. Just give me the proper cues, that's all."

"Wait until I hear from my telegram," says Vee. "I'll let you know."

I didn't get the word until Tuesday afternoon, when she 'phones down.

"He's coming," says Vee. "Isn't he the

dear, though? So we'll make it to-morrow. Everything you can possibly think of, remember."

As a starter I'd spotted the elevator-boy up at Auntie's. Andrew Zink is his full name, and he's a straight-haired smoke from the West Indies. We'd exchanged a few confidential comments on Miss Burr, and I'd discovered she was just about as popular with him as she was with the rest of us.

"But for to-morrow, Andy," says I, slippin' him a whole half dollar, "we're goin' to forget it. See? It'll be, 'Oh, yes, Miss Burr,' and 'Certainly, Miss Burr,' all day long, not omitting the little posie you're goin' to offer her first thing in the mornin'."

Andy tucks away the half and grins.

"Very well, sir," says he. "It'll be quite a lark, sir."

Next I fixed it up with Mike, the doorman. He'd had a little run-in with Myra about not gettin' a taxi quite quick enough for her, so I had to double the ante and explain how this was a scheme Vee was workin'.

"Sure!" says he. "Anything Miss Verona says goes with me. I'll do my best."

The hard part came, though, when I has to invite Myra to this little dinner-party I'm supposed to be givin'. Course, it's Auntie's

blow, but she's been primed by Vee to insist that I do the honors. First off, I was goin' to run up durin' lunch hour and pass it to Cousin Myra in person; but about eleven o'clock I decides it would be safer to use the 'phone.

"Oh!" says she. "I am to be utilized as a chaperon, am I?"

"Couldn't think of anybody who'd do it better," says I; "but, as a matter of fact, that ain't the idea. Auntie's going, you see, and I thought maybe I could induce you to come along, too."

"But I detest hotel dinners," says she.

"Ah, come on! Be a sport!" says I. "Lemme show you what I can pick from the menu. For one item, there'll be *tripe à la mode de Caen.*"

"Then I'll come," says Myra. "But how on earth, young man, did you know that—"

"Just wait!" says I. "You got a lot of guessin' besides that. I'll call for you at seven sharp."

So I spent most of my noon hour rustlin' through florist shops to get the particular kind of red roses I'd been tipped off to find. I located 'em, though, and bought up the whole stock, sendin' part to the house and luggin' the rest to the head waiter. While I was at

the hotel, too, I got next to the orchestra leader and gave him the names of some pieces he was to spring durin' dinner.

After all, though, it was Auntie who turned the cleverest trick. She'd got real enthusiastic by Wednesday mornin', and what does she do but dash down to the Maison Félice, pick out a two-hundred-dollar evenin' gown, and have it sent up with a fitter. Vee says Myra simply wouldn't open the box for half an hour; but then she softened up, and after she'd been buckled into this pink creation with the rosebud shoulder straps she consents to take one squint at the glass. Then it develops that Myra is still human. From that to allowin' a hairdresser to be called in was only a step, which explains the whole miracle of how Myra blossomed out.

And say, for a late bloomin' it was a wonder. Honest, when I gets my first glimpse of her standin' under the hall light with Hilda holdin' her opera wrap, I lets out a gurgle. Had I wandered into the wrong apartment? Was I disturbin' some leadin' lady just goin' on for the first act? No, there was Cousin Myra's thin nose and pointed chin. But, with her hair loosened up and her cheeks tinted a bit from excitement, she looks like a different party. Almost stunnin', you know.

Vee nudges me to quit the gawp act.

"Gosh!" I whispers. "Who'd have thought it?"

"S-s-s-sh!" says Vee. "We don't want her to suspect a thing."

I don't know whether she did or not, but when we're towed into the dinin'-room she spots the table decorations right off, and whirls on me.

"Here's plotting, young man," says she. "But if you will tell me how you discovered I was so fond of Louis Philippe roses I'll forgive you."

"Looks like I was a good guesser, don't it?" says I.

"You're good at something, anyway," says Cousin Myra; "but—but why five places?"

She's noticed the extra plate and is glancin' around inquirin'.

"Oh!" says I, offhand, "odd numbers for luck, so I took a chance on askin' in an old friend of yours. He ought to be in the cloak-room by now. I'll go fetch him."

You should have seen the look on her face, too, when I shows up with Professor Hinckley. He's a perfectly good highbrow, understand —pointed face whiskers, shaggy forelock, wide black ribbon on his eyeglasses, and all—sort

of a mild-eyed, modest appearin' gent, but kind of distinguished-lookin', at that. And you'd never guess how nervous he really was.

"Well, Myra?" says he, beamin' friendly through his glasses.

"Lester!" she gasps.

They didn't exactly go to a clinch, but they shook hands so long the waiter had to slide the caviar canape between 'em, and even after we got 'em to sit down they couldn't seem to break off gazin' at each other. As a fond reunion it was a success from the first tap of the bell. They went to it strong.

As for the Profess., he seemed to be knocked clear off his pins. Honest, I don't believe he knew whether he was eatin' dinner or steerin' an airship. I caught him once tryin' to butter an olive with a bread stick, and he sopped up a pink cocktail without even lookin' at it. The same thing happened to the one Vee pushed over near his absent-minded hand. And the deeper he got into the dinner the livelier grew the twinkle in them mild eyes of his.

Cousin Myra, too, was mellowin' fast. The first time she let loose with a laugh, I near fell off my chair; but before long I got used to it. Next thing I knew, she was smilin' across at me real roguish, and beatin' time with her finger-tips to the music.

"Ah, ha!" says she. "More of your tricks. I thought the 'Nocturne' was just an accident, but now the 'Blue Danube'—that is your work, young man. Or is it Verona's? Come now, what are you up to, you two over there?"

"Ask Torchy," says Vee, shakin' her head.

"Don't you believe her," says I. "She's the one that planned most of this."

"But what is it?" demands Cousin Myra. "What do you call it?"

"Why," says I, grinnin' more or less foolish, "we're just givin' a Myra day, that's all."

"Splendid!" says she. "And the fact that I don't in the least deserve it makes it seem all the nicer. I suppose your being here, Lester, is part of the plot, too?"

"I hope so," says the Professor.

"Do you know," says Myra, liftin' her glass and glancin' kittenish over the brim at him, "I mean to try to live up to this day. I don't mind saying, though, that for a while it's going to be an awful strain."

"Anyway," says I to Vee, after it's all over and the Professor has finally said good night, "she's got a good start."

"Yes," says Vee, " and perhaps Lester will help some. I didn't quite look for that. It's been fun, though, hasn't it?"

"For an indoor sport," says I, "givin' a Myra day is a lot merrier than it sounds. It beats bein' good to yourself nine up and six to go."

CHAPTER IX

REPORTING BLANK ON RUPERT

And yet, I've had people ask me if this private sec. job didn't get sort of monotonous! Does it? Say, listen a while!

I was breezin' through the arcade here the other noon, about twenty minutes behind my lunch schedule, when someone backs away from the marble wall tablets the agents have erected in honor of them firms that keep their rent paid. Some perfect stranger it is, who does the reverse goose step so unexpected that there's no duckin' a collision. Quite a substantial party he is, too, and where my nose connects with his shoulder he's built about as solid as a concrete pillar.

"Say," I remarks, when the aurora borealis has faded out and I can see straight again, "if you're goin' to carom around that way in public, you ought to wear pads."

"Oh, I'm sorry," says he. "I didn't mean to be so awkward. Hope you're not hurt, sir."

Then I did do some gawpin'. For who'd ever expect a big, rough-finished husk like that

would have such a soft, ladylike voice concealed about him? And the "sir" was real soothin'.

"It's all right," says I. "Guess I ain't disabled for life. Next time, though, I'll be particular to walk around."

"But really," he goes on, "I—I'm not here regularly. I was just trying to find a name—a Mr. Robert Ellins."

"Eh?" says I. "Lookin' for Mr. Robert, are you?"

"Then you know him?" he asks eager.

"Ought to," says I. "He's my boss. Corrugated Trust is what you should have looked under."

"Ah, yes; I remember now," says he. "Corrugated Trust—that's the part I'd forgotten. Then perhaps you can tell me just where—"

"I could," says I, "but it wouldn't do you a bit of good. He's got appointments up to 1:15. After that he'll be taking two hours off for luncheon—if he comes back at all. Better make a date for to-morrow or next day."

The solid gent looks disappointed.

"I had hoped I might find him to-day," says he. "It—it's rather important."

At which I sizes him up a little closer. Sort of a carrot blond, this gent is, with close-cropped pale red hair, about the ruddiest neck

you ever saw off a turkey gobbler, and a face that's so freckled it looks crowded. The double-breasted blue serge coat and the blue flannel shirt with the black sailor tie gives me a hunch, though. Maybe he's one of Mr. Robert's yacht captains.

"What name?" says I.

"Killam," says he. "Rupert Killam."

"Sounds bloodthirsty," says I. "Cap'n, eh?"

"Why—er—yes," says he. "That is what I am usually called."

"I see," says I. "Used to sail his 60-footer, did you?"

No, that wasn't quite the idea, either. That's somewhere near his line, though, and he wants to see Mr. Robert very particular.

"I think I may assure you," the Captain goes on, "that it will be to his advantage."

"In that case," says I, "you'd better tell it to me; private sec., you know. And if you make a date that's what you'll have to do, anyway. Suppose you come along and feed with me. Then you can shoot the details durin' lunch and we'll save time. Oh, I'll charge it up to the firm, never fear."

The Cap. don't seem anxious to have his information strained through a third party that way, but I finally convinces him it's the

regular course for gettin' a hearin', so he trails along to the chophouse. And, in spite of his flannel shirt, Rupert seems well table broken. He don't do the bib act with his napkin, or try any sword-swallowin' stunt.

"Now, what's it all about?" says I, as we gets to the pastry and demitasse.

"Well," says Killam, after glancin' around sleuthy and seein' nobody more suspicious than a yawnin' 'bus boy, "I have found the lost treasure of José Gaspar."

"Have you?" says I, through a mouthful of strawb'ry shortcake. "When did he lose it?"

"Haven't you ever read," says he, "of Gasparilla?"

"Is it a new drink, or what?" says I.

"No, no," says he. "Gasparilla, the great pirate, once the terror of the Spanish Main. Surely you must have read about him."

"Nope," says I. "That Nick Carter junk never got to me very strong."

The Cap. stares at me sort of surprised and pained.

"But this isn't a dime-novel story I am telling," he protests. "José Gaspar was a real person—just as real as George Washington or John Paul Jones. He was a genuine pirate, too, and the fact that he had his headquarters

on the west coast of Florida is well established. It's history. And it is also true that he buried much of his stolen treasure—gold and jewelry and precious stones—on some one of those thousands of sandy keys which line the Gulf coast from Anclote Light to White Water Bay. For nearly two hundred years men have hunted for that treasure. Why even the United States Government once sent out an expedition to find it. But I, Rupert Killam, have at last discovered the true hiding place of that secret hoard."

Can you beat that for a batty conversation to be handed across the table, right on Broadway at high noon? But say, take it from me, this Rupert party is some convincin' spieler. With that low, smooth voice of his, and them buttermilk blue eyes fixed steady and earnest on mine, I was all but under the spell for a minute or so there. Then I shakes myself and gets back to normal.

"Say," says I, "you ain't lookin' to put any such fancy tale as that over on Mr. Robert, are you?"

"I hope I can interest him in the enterprise," says Killam.

"Well, take my advice and don't waste your time," says I. "He's a good deal of a sport and all that, but I don't think he'd fall for

anything so musty as this old doubloon and pieces-of-eight dope."

"I have proofs," says Rupert, "absolute proofs."

"Got the regulation old chart, eh," says I, "with the lone tree marked by a dagger?"

No, he didn't have a chart. He went on to say how the treasure was buried on a certain little island under a mound in the middle of a mangrove swamp. He'd been there. He'd actually helped dig into one corner of the mound. He had four pieces of jewelry that he'd taken out himself; and nobody knew how many chests full was left.

"Back up!" says I. "Why didn't you go on diggin'?"

But he's right there with a perfectly good alibi. Seems, if he dug up anything valuable and got caught at it, he'd have to whack up a percentage with the owner of the land. Also, the government would holler for a share. So his plan is to keep mum, buy up the island, then charter a big yacht and cruise down there casually, disguised as a tourist. Once at the island, he could let on to break a propeller shaft or something, and sneak ashore after the gold and stuff at night when the crew was asleep.

The Cap. explains that to do it right would

take more cash than he could raise. Hence his proposition for lettin' in Mr. Robert to finance the expedition. No, he didn't know Mr. Robert personally, but he'd heard a lot about him in one way or another, and understood he was generally willin' to take a chance.

"Maybe you're right," says I. "Anyway, he shouldn't miss hearin' this lovely yarn of yours. You come back with me and I'll see if I can't fix it durin' the afternoon. Let's see, what did you say the name of this island was?"

"I didn't say," says Rupert. "I can tell you the old Spanish name, however, which no one on the west coast seems to know. It is Nunca Secos Key—meaning the key that is never dry."

"Huh!" says I. "That listens better in Spanish. Better not translate if you want to make a hit."

"I am merely stating the facts as they are," says Rupert.

He's a serious-minded gink, and all frivolous cracks are lost on him completely. He's a patient waiter, too. He sticks around for over two hours without gettin' restless, until finally Mr. Robert blows in from the club. First chance I gets, I springs Rupert on him.

"A guy with a great little scheme," says I, winkin'. "If you can spare ten minutes

he'll tell you something worth while, so he says."

"Very well," says Mr. Robert. "But ten minutes must be the limit."

Say, it was rich, too, watchin' Mr. Robert's face as he listens to this weird tale of pirates and buried gold. First off he was tryin' to be polite, and only smiled sarcastic; but when Rupert gets to spreadin' on the romance, Mr. Robert starts drummin' his fingers on the desk and glancin' at his watch.

Right in the midst of the recital, too, Old Hickory drifts out of his private office, and stands waitin' with his ear cocked. He has a report or something he wants to ask a question about, and I was lookin' every minute to see him crash right in. But Rupert is in high gear, and goin' stronger all the while; so Mr. Ellins just stands there and listens. The Cap. had got to the part where he describes this mysterious island with the mound in the middle, when Mr. Robert shrugs his shoulders impatient.

"My good fellow," says he, "whatever gave you the notion I would be interested in such rubbish? Sorry, but your time is up. Torchy, will you show Mr.—er—what's-his-name to the elevator?"

Which I did as comfortin' as I knew how.

Course, he's feelin' some hurt at bein' choked off so abrupt, but he takes it calm enough.

"Oh, well," says he, "perhaps I can find someone else who will appreciate that this is the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Sure you can," says I. "Broadway's just lined with willin' ears."

I'd loaded him into an elevator and was strollin' through the waitin'-room, when Old Hickory comes paddin' out as slinky as a man of his weight can.

"Young man," says he, "where is that Captain person?"

"About the tenth floor by now, sir," says I.

"Bring him back," says Mr. Ellins, sharp and snappy. "Through the private entrance. Understand?"

I nods and makes a dive into an upbound car that's just makin' a stop at the seventeenth. "Hey, Jimmy, reverse her! I'll square you with the starter. That's it. Shoot us down."

So, when Rupert steps out on the ground floor, I'm there to take him by the arm and lead him back into the elevator.

"Why—why, what's the matter now?" he asks.

"Couldn't say," says I. "Only you're wanted again. It's the Big Boss this time—Old Hickory Ellins himself. And lemme put

you hep to this, Cap'n; if that's a phony tale you're peddlin', don't try it on him."

"But it's all true—every word of it," insists Rupert.

"Even so," says I, "I wouldn't chance it on with Old Hickory. He's a hard-headed old plute, and that romance dope is likely to make him froth at the mouth. If he starts in givin' you the third degree, or anything like that, you'd better close up like a clam. Here we are, and for the love of Pete draw it mild."

You see, I hadn't minded passin' on a freak to Mr. Robert, for he often gets a laugh out of 'em. But Mr. Ellins is different. The site of his bump of humor is a dimple at the base of his skull, and if he traces up the fact that I'm the one who turned Rupert and his pirate yarn loose in the general offices my standin' as a discriminatin' private sec. is goin' to get a sad jolt.

So when Cap'n Killam has been in on the carpet near an hour, with no signs of his either havin' been let out or fired through a window, I begins to get nervous. Once Mr. Robert starts to go into Old Hickory's sanctum; but he finds the door locked, and shortly after that he shuts his roll-top and leaves for the day.

It's near closin' time when Old Hickory

opens the door an inch or two, throws a scouty glance around, and beckons me mysterious to come in. Rupert is still there and still alive. In fact, he's chokin' over one of Mr. Ellins' fat black cigars, but otherwise lookin' fairly satisfied with himself.

"Young man," says Old Hickory, "I understand that you have heard some of Captain Killam's story."

"Eh?" says I, careless like. "Oh, yes; I believe he did feed a little of that tale to me, but—"

"You will kindly forget to mention it about the office," he cuts in.

"Yes, sir," says I. "That'll be the easiest thing I do. At the time it sounded mighty—"

"Never mind how it sounded to you," says he. "Your enthusiasms are easily aroused. Mine kindle somewhat more slowly, but when—Well, no need to discuss that, either. What I want you to do is to take Captain Killam to some quiet little hotel—the Tillington, for instance—and engage a comfortable room for him; a room and bath, perhaps."

"Ye-es, sir," I gasps out.

"In the morning," he goes on, "you will call for the Captain about nine o'clock. If he has with him at that time certain odd pieces of antique jewelry, you may report over the

'phone to me and I will tell you what to do next."

I expect I was gawpin' some, and starin' from one to the other of 'em, for Mr. Ellins scowls and clears his throat menacin'.

"Well?" he growls.

"I was just lettin' it sink in, sir," says I.

"Humph!" he snorts. "If it will help the process any, I may say that I am considering the possibility of going on a cruise South with Captain Killam—for my health."

At which Old Hickory drops his left eyelid and indulges in what passes with him for a chuckle.

That's my cue to grin knowin', after which I gets my hat and starts off with Rupert. We'd only got into the corridor when Old Hickory calls me back, wavin' a twenty.

"Pay for two days in advance," says he, and then adds in a whisper: "Keep close track of him. See that he doesn't get away, or talk too much."

"Yes, sir," says I. "Gag and bind, if necessary."

But there don't seem to be much need of even warnin' Rupert. He hardly opens his mouth on the way up to the hotel, but trails along silent, his eyes fixed starey, like he was thinkin' deep.

"Well," says I, after a bell-hop had shown us into one of the Tillington's air-shaft rooms and gone for ten cents' worth of ice water, "it looks like you had the Big Boss almost buffaloed with that pirate tale of yours."

Rupert don't enthuse much at that.

"As a cautious business man," says he, "I suppose Mr. Ellins is quite right in moving slowly. He wants to see the jewelry, and he wishes time to investigate. Still, it seems to me that my story ought to speak for itself."

"That's the line," says I. "Stick to that. But I wouldn't chatter about it to strangers."

Rupert smiles indulgent.

"Thank you," says he. "You need not fear. I have kept my secret for three years—and I still hold it."

He's a dramatic cuss, Rupert. I leaves him posin' in front of the mirror on the bathroom door, gazin' sort of romantic at himself.

"Not a common, everyday nut," as I explains to Vee that night, when I goes up for my reg'lar Wednesday evenin' call, "but a nut, all the same. Sort of a parlor pirate, too."

"And you think there isn't any buried treasure, after all?" asks Vee.

"Don't it sound simple?" I demands.

"I'm not so sure," says Vee, shakin' her

head. "There were pirates on the Florida coast, you know. I've read about them. And —and just fancy, Torchy! If his story were really true!"

"What was the name of that island, again?" puts in Auntie.

Honest, I hadn't thought she was takin' notice at all when I was givin' Vee a full account of my afternoon session with Rupert. She never does chime in much with our talk. And I judged she was too busy with her sweater-knittin' to hear a word. But here she is, askin' details.

"Why," says I, "Captain Killam calls it Nunca Secos Key."

"What an odd name!" says Auntie. "And you left him at some hotel, did you? The—er—"

"Tillington," says I.

"Oh, yes," says Auntie, and resumes her knittin' placid.

Course, there I was, gassin' away merry about what Old Hickory wanted kept a dead secret. But I usually do tell things to Vee. She ain't one of the leaky kind. And Auntie don't go out much. Besides, who'd think of an old girl like that ever bein' interested in such wild back-number stuff? How foolish!

So I wasn't worryin' any that night, and at

quarter of nine next mornin' I shows up at the hotel to send up a call for Rupert.

"Captain Killam?" says the room clerk with the plastered front hair. "Why, he left an hour or more ago."

"Yes, I know," says I; "but he was coming back."

"No," says the clerk; "he said he wasn't. Took his bag, too."

"Wha-a-at!" I gasps. "He—he ain't gone for good, has he?"

"So it seems," says the clerk, and steps back to continue his chat with the snub-nosed young lady at the 'phone exchange.

How was that for an early-mornin' bump? What was the idea, anyway? Rupert had found a prospective backer, hadn't he? And was bein' taken care of. What more could he ask? Unless—unless someone else had got next to him. But who could have heard of this—

"Gee!" I groans. "I wonder?"

I couldn't stand there starin' foolish across the register and do the wonderin' act all day, though. Besides, I wanted to follow a clew. It ain't a very likely one, but it's better'n nothing. So I slides out and boards a Columbus Avenue surface car, and inside of twenty minutes I'm at Auntie's apartments, interviewin' Helma, her original bonehead maid.

No, Miss Verona wasn't at home. She'd gone for her morning ride in the park. Also Auntie was out.

"So early as this?" says I. "When did Auntie get away?"

"Before breakfast yet," says Helma. "She telephone long time, then a gentlemans coom, and she go out."

"Not a gent with pale hair and plenty of freckles on his face?" I asks.

Helma gazes thoughtless at the ceilin' a minute.

"Yah," says she. "Den have funny face, all—all rusty."

"The sleuthy old kidnapper!" says I. "Could she have pulled anything like that? Here, lemme step in and leave a note for Miss Vee. I want her to call me up when she comes in. No, I'll dash it off right here on the lib'ry table. Here's a pad and—"

I broke off there, because my mouth was open too wide for further remarks. On the table was a big atlas opened to the map of Florida. And on the margin, with a line drawn from about the middle of the west coast, was something written faint in pencil.

"Nunca Secos Key!" I reads. "Good night! Auntie's got the bug—and Rupert."

"Vass it is?" asks Helma.

"I'm double-crossed, that's what it is," says I. "I've had a nice long nap at the switch, and I've just woke up in time to see the fast express crash on towards an open draw. Hal-lup! Hal-lup! I know I'll never be the same again."

"It's too bad, yah," says Helma sympathetic.

"That don't half describe it," says I. "And what is goin' to happen when I report to Old Hickory won't be nice to print in the papers."

"Should I say something by Miss Vee when she coom?" asks Helma.

"Yes," says I. "Tell her to kindly omit flowers."

And with that I starts draggy towards the elevator.

Oh, no! Private seccing ain't always what you might call a slumber part.

CHAPTER X

WHEN AUNTIE CRASHES IN

You know Forty-seventh Street and Broadway, the northwest corner? Say, would you judge there was a specially foolish streak runnin' across town about there? No, I don't see why there should be; only it was exactly on that spot I was struck by the hunch that this kidnappin' act of Auntie's was a joke.

Now, look. A freckle-faced parlor pirate with no more credentials than a park panhandler blows in from nowhere particular, and tells a wild yarn about buried treasure on the west cost of Florida. First off he gets Old Hickory Ellins, president of the Corrugated Trust and generally a cagey old boy, more or less worked up. Mr. Ellins turns him over to me, with orders to watch him close while he's investigatin' the tale. Then, when I'm gabbin' free and careless about it to Vee, her Auntie sits there with her ear stretched. She wants to know what hotel I've left the Captain at. And the next mornin' he's gone. Also on other counts the arrow points to Auntie.

There I was, too, on my way back to Old Hickory, figurin' whether I'd better resign first and report afterwards, or just take my chances that maybe after he'd slept on it he wouldn't be so keen about seein' this Captain Killam again. Then the whole thing hit me on the funnybone. Haw-haw! Auntie, the sober old girl with the mixed-pickle disposition, suddenly comin' to life and pinchin' Old Hickory's find while he's tryin' to make up his mind whether it's phony or not. Auntie, of all people! More hearty haw-haws.

When I finally does drift into Old Hickory's private office and he motions me to shut the door, I'm still registerin' merry thoughts.

"Well?" says he, snappin' it out crisp.

"You'd never guess," says I, smotherin' a chuckle.

"Eh?" says he, shootin' a puzzled glance at me from under them overhangin' eyebrows of his. "Who wants to guess? What about Captain Killam?"

"That's just it," says I. "He's flitted."

"Wha-a-at!" snorts Old Hickory. "You don't mean he has gone?"

"Uh-huh!" says I. "Been lured away. But say,"—here I indulges in my most comic open-face movement,—"who do you suppose did the trick on us?"

Old Hickory stares at me and waves his cigar impatient. "Go on," he growls.

"You know Miss Vee's aunt," says I, "Mrs. Cornelia Hemmingway? Well, she's got him. Yep! Just naturally kidnapped him, I expect. I had my suspicions of her the minute I found the Captain was gone. So I chases right up there. She's out. The maid admits she went away with a party answerin' Killam's description. I wouldn't have been sure, though, if I hadn't found a map of Florida on the lib'ry table and Nunca Secos Key marked on it. Now, what do you know about that? Auntie! Ain't that rich?"

No hilarity from Old Hickory—not even one of them cracked concrete smiles of his. He just sits there glarin' at me, missin' the comedy cue altogether.

"Young man," says he, "just a moment before we get any further off the track. How did Mrs. Hemmingway happen to learn about Captain Killam?"

"Why," says I, "she had her ear out while I was tellin' Miss Vee. Would you believe, though, that an old girl like her—"

"I would," says he. "Humorous as it may seem to you, I should credit almost anyone with wanting to dig up several million dollars, if they could find where it was hidden."

"But—" I begins.

"Besides Miss Verona and her aunt," goes on Old Hickory, "how many others have you made acquainted with what I was doing my best to keep a secret?"

"Not a soul," says I. "Honest!"

"Temporary paralysis of the tongue, eh?" he asks. "It's a wonder you didn't have it published in the morning papers. Quite thoughtless of you. Hah!"

And say; next time I think I have a joke for Old Hickory I'll go down to Thirty-third Street and try it first on the statue of Horace Greeley. If he rocks back and forth in his bronze chair and lifts the roof off the L station above, I'll know it may do to pass on to Mr. Ellins. Yep! That's just the way I feel about it.

"I expect I'm released on this case, then?" says I, after waitin' while Old Hickory chews his cigar savage for a couple of minutes.

"No," he snaps out. "You've succeeded in losing Captain Killam; now you'll help find him again. I'll go with you this time. Come."

Seemed too simple for words at first, me and Mr. Ellins startin' out to hunt New York for a batty stranger in a blue flannel shirt. By degrees, though, I got the idea. It's the competition that has stirred him up. Likely enough, he'd have turned Rupert and his

scheme down cold if it hadn't been for that. But when Auntie crashes in, the case is entirely different; then he's strong for it. Settin' that time-lock jaw of his and lightin' a fresh perfecto, Old Hickory grabs his hat; and off we go, with me trailin' along reluctant. His first move is to hail a taxi.

"Just goin' to cruise around town casual in the hopes of spottin' him on the fly, eh?" I asks.

"Hardly," says Mr. Ellins. "I'm not going to stand in the middle of Broadway and whistle for him either, or throw out a hook and line and troll. I think we will go first to Mrs. Hemmingway's, if you will kindly give the driver the number."

He can be more brutally polite than anyone I ever saw. I wasn't enjoyin' that ride so much, and it's a relief when we pulls up at the curb. I offers to run in and see if Auntie is back yet, but he won't have it.

"Just lead the way, that's all," says he.

"Oh, very well," says I.

And when Helma, the maid, has used up all her hyphenated English in assurin' us that "Meesus" is still out, I rubs it in by shruggin' my shoulders and glancin' knowin' at him.

"Mees Verona, she coom," suggests Helma.

"Good!" says I. "I'd like a word with her, anyway."

Having just finished her canter in the park, Vee is still in her riding togs; and, take it from me, that's some snappy costume of hers. Maybe she ain't easy to look at, too, as she floats in with the pink in her cheeks and her eyes sparklin'. Wish I could fit into a frock-coat like that, or wear such shiny little boots. Even Old Hickory cheers up a bit at sight of her.

"Why, Torchy!" says she, holdin' out her hand. "And Mr. Ellins!"

"Morning calls right along for me, after this," says I, sort of walkin' around her. "It's worth while."

"Old thing!" says she. "Don't be silly. But what is the matter?"

I glances at Mr. Ellins. "Shall I tell?" says I.

"As that seems to be your specialty," says he, "perhaps you had better."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir," says I, salutin'.

Then I turns to Vee. "Seen Auntie this morning?" I asks.

"Why, no," says Vee. "I was up rather early, you know."

"Not so early as she was," says I. "What do you think she's done? Jumped in on that

treasure hunt I was tellin' you of. She's pinched Rupert, and by now maybe they're on their way South."

Vee stares at me for a second, and then gives one of them ripply laughs.

"How crazy of you to think such a thing!" says she.

"Here's the evidence in the case," says I, pointin' to the map with the scribblin' on the side. "That's her writin', ain't it? And you remember her wakin' up and askin' questions, don't you?"

"Ye-e-es," admits Vee; "but I'm sure she hasn't—"

"She and the Captain are missing," says I. "That's what comes of my gettin' chatty about business affairs. I didn't dream, though, that Auntie was such a plunger."

"I can't believe it," says Vee. "There's been some ridiculous mistake. But I can't imagine where she could have gone so early."

"Couldn't have had time to pack a trunk, could she?" I asks. "If not, she'd be coming back some time to-day. Shall we wait here a while, Mr. Ellins?"

"I think I prefer a meeting on neutral grounds," says he.

So we goes downstairs and paces up and

down the sidewalk, watchin' the avenue traffic sleuthy.

"Course she wouldn't start off without baggage," I suggests.

"I'm not so certain," growls Old Hickory.

Ten minutes we waited—fifteen; and then I spots a yellow taxi rollin' up from downtown. Inside I gets a glimpse of a black straw lid with purple flowers on it.

"Here she comes!" I sings out to Old Hickory. "Yep, that's her! And say! The Captain's with her. Quick! Dive into our cab."

He's a little heavy on his feet, Mr. Ellins is, and someway he manages to get himself hung up on the cab door. Anyway, Auntie must have seen us doin' the wild scramble, and got suspicious; for, just as they got alongside, she pounds on the front window, shouts something at the driver, and instead of stoppin' the other taxi veers off and goes smokin' uptown.

"Hey!" yells Mr. Ellins to our driver. "Catch that yellow car! Ten dollars if you catch it."

And you know it's just the chance of hearin' a few kind words like them that these taxi pirates live for. This old coffee mill that Mr. Ellins had hailed reckless could give out more groans and grinds and produce less speed than

any other fare trap I was ever in. The connectin' rods was wabbly on the shaft, the gears complained scandalous, and the hit-and-miss average of the cylinders was about 33 per cent.

But after a few preliminary jack-rabbit jumps she begun to get headway, and the next I knew our driver was leanin' over his wheel like he was after the Vanderbilt Cup. He must have been throwin' all his weight on the juice button and slippin' his clutch judicious, for we sure was breezin' some. Inside of two blocks we'd eaten up half the lead and was tearin' uptown like a battalion chief answerin' a third alarm. I glances at Old Hickory to see if he's gettin' nervous at some of the close shaves; but he's braced himself in one corner, his teeth sunk deep into his cigar and his eyes glued on that yellow taxi ahead.

They was wise to the fact that we was after 'em, too. First Auntie would rubber back at us, and then lean forward to prod up her chauffeur. A couple of rare old sports, them two, with no more worries for what might happen to their necks than if they'd been joy-riders speedin' home at 3 A.M. from the Pink Lady Inn.

Me, I was holdin' my breath and waitin' for the grand smash. If Auntie's driver had stuck to a straightaway run we'd either caught 'em

or smeared ourselves against a beer truck or something. But after the first mile he takes to dodgin'. *Zip!* he goes on two wheels around a corner.

"After him now!" orders Old Hickory. "I'll make it twenty if you don't let him get away."

"You're on!" says our speed maniac, and does a carom skid into a cross street that showed he didn't need any banked turns in his.

In and out we goes, east and west and up and down; now losin' sight of the yellow taxi altogether, then pickin' it up again; droppin' behind a whole block when the traffic broke bad for us, but makin' it up when something got in the way of the other cab.

Our gears was hummin' a reg'lar tomcat chorus, but with the throttle wide open the motor was hittin' on four most of the time.

Talk about your chariot race! Say, if we'd had Ben Hur aboard he'd been down on the floor, clawin' the mat. Twice we scraped fenders with passin' cars, and you could have traced every turn we made by the wheel paint we left on the curb corners. It was a game of gasoline cross-tag. We wasn't merely rollin'; we was one-steppin', fox-trottin', with a few Loupovka motions thrown in for variety. And, at that, Auntie was holdin' the lead.

Down at Fifty-ninth, what does her driver do but swing into Fifth Avenue, right in the thick of it. That was no bonehead play either, for if there's any one stretch in town where you can let out absolutely reckless and get a medal for it, that's the place. Course, you got to take it in short spurts when you get the "go" signal, and that's what he was doin'. I watched him wipe both ends of a green motor bus and squeeze into a space that didn't look big enough for a baby carriage.

"Auntie must be biddin' up on the results, too," I remarks to Mr. Ellins. "There they duck through Forty-third."

"Try Forty-fourth," sings out Old Hickory. "In here!"

It was a poor guess, for when we hits Sixth Avenue there's no yellow taxi in sight.

"Wouldn't Auntie's game be to double back home?" I suggests.

"We'll see," says Old Hickory, and gives the order to beat it uptown again.

And, sure enough, just as we gets in sight of the apartment house, there's the other taxi, with Auntie haulin' Captain Killam out hasty. Before we can dash up and pile out, they've disappeared in the vestibule.

"Looks like we'd lost out by a nose," says I.

"Not yet," says Old Hickory. "I intend to see what those two mean by this."

And after 'em we rushes.

But the one elevator was half way up when we fetches the gate. Old Hickory puts his finger on the button and holds it there.

"They've stopped at the fourth," says I. "Now it'll be comin'— No; it's goin' all the way to the roof!"

There it stayed, too, although Old Hickory shoots some spicy commands up the elevator well.

"No use; he's been bought," says I. "What's the matter with the stairs? Only three flights."

"Good idea!" says Mr. Ellins; and up we starts.

He wouldn't break any stair-climbin' records in an amateur contest, though, and when he does puff on to the last landin' he's purple behind the ears and ain't got breath enough left to make any kind of speech. So I tackles another interview with Helma.

"No," says she; "Meesus not coom yet."

"Ah, ditch the perjury stuff, Helma," says I. "Didn't we just follow her in?"

"No coom yet," insists Helma in her wooden way.

That's all I can get out of her, too. It wasn't that she'd had orders to say Auntie

wasn't at home, or didn't care to receive just then. Helma sticks to the simple statement that Auntie hasn't come back.

"But say," I protests; "we just trailed her here. Get that? We was right on her heels when she struck the elevator. And the Captain was with her."

"No coom," says Helma, shakin' her head solemn.

"Why, you she-Ananias, you!" I gasps. "Do you mean to tell me that—"

"I beg pardon," says a familiar acetic acid voice behind us—and I turns to see Auntie steppin' out of the elevator. "Were you looking for someone?" she goes on.

"You've guessed it," says I. "In fact, we was—"

"Madam," breaks in Mr. Ellins, "will you kindly tell me what you have done with Captain Rupert Killam?"

"Certainly, Mr. Ellins," says Auntie. "Won't you step in?"

"I should prefer to be told here, at once," says Old Hickory.

"My preference," comes back Auntie, "if I must be cross-examined, is to undergo the process in the privacy of my own library, not in a public hallway."

Well, there was nothing else to it. We could

either stay out there and stare at the door, or follow her in. So in we goes. And maybe Vee's gray eyes don't open some wide as she views the procession streamin' in. She glances at me inquirin'. I throws up both hands and shakes my head, indicatin' that it was beyond words.

"Now," says Auntie, liftin' her purple-decorated lid off one ear and tuckin' a stray lock into her back hair, "I will answer your question. I have just sent Captain Killam back to his hotel."

"The Illington?" demands Old Hickory.

"No," says Auntie. "It was my fancy that Captain Killam deserved rather better quarters than those you saw fit to provide. So I found others for him—just where, I do not care to say."

"But he came in here with you a moment ago," insists Old Hickory. "How could you—"

"I'm next!" says I. "You smuggles him over the roof and down the elevator in the next building. Wasn't that how you gave us the slip?"

Auntie indulges in one of them lemony, tight-lipped smiles of hers. "You have exposed my poor strategy," says she; "but a little late, I trust."

Mr. Ellins makes her a bow.

"Mrs. Hemmingway," says he, "my compliments on your cleverness as a tactician. But I fail to see how you justify your methods. You knew that I was negotiating with Captain Killam?"

"Oh, yes," says she.

"And in spite of that," goes on Mr. Ellins, "you induce him to break his word to me and you hide him in another hotel."

"Something like that," admits Auntie, squarin' her jaw. "Why not, Mr. Ellins?"

"Why, Auntie!" gasps Vee.

"Verona!" says Auntie, shootin' over a reprovin' look.

"But see here," protests Old Hickory. "I was arranging with this man to fit out a treasure-hunting expedition. He had made a verbal contract with me. Just because you overheard my plans, you had no right to take advantage. You can't do that sort of thing, you know."

"Oh, can't I?" sneers Auntie, lookin' him straight in the eye. "But I have, you see."

And that's one of the few times I ever saw Old Hickory Ellins squirm at a come-back. He pinks up some, too; but he keeps a grip on his temper.

"Then you—you intend financing this somewhat doubtful enterprise?" he asks. "A man

you know nothing about, too. Suppose he never comes back?"

"I shall go along myself," says Auntie.

"You?" says Old Hickory. "To dig for buried treasure!"

"I have always wanted to do something of the kind," says Auntie. "True, I may not look like that sort of a person, and I suppose that I do lead rather a dull, commonplace existence. Not from choice, however. Once I was shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, and I found it a thrilling experience. Also I once spent nearly a week on a snow-bound train in the Rockies; I would not have missed that for anything. And if Captain Killam can lead me to genuine adventures, I am going to follow. So there you have it! All you saw in his story, I presume, was a chance to add to your millions. The romance of the thing, the mystery of that forgotten little island with its long hidden pirate hoard, never appealed to you in the least."

"Oh, didn't it!" says Old Hickory.

For a second or so he stares over her head at the wall beyond, and around his grim mouth corners come softer lines than I'd ever seen there before. Then, all of a sudden, he adds:

"You'll need a roomy, light-draught yacht."

"We were just going to look for one," says

Auntie. "I was returning for my checkbook when you interfered."

"That was a rather lively pace you set for us," almost chuckles Old Hickory.

"I have never enjoyed a ride more," says Auntie. "My blood is still tingling from it."

"And mine," says Mr. Ellins. "We nearly overhauled you once. Did your cab hit anything?"

"Only the hub of an ashcart," says she. "We lost part of a front fender. And once a traffic policeman tried to arrest us. We rushed him, though."

"Auntie!" comes from Vee husky, as she drops back on a window seat. But Auntie takes no notice.

"I say," goes on Old Hickory, "has Killam shown you the jewelry he dug from the mound?"

Auntie nods. "It is genuine antique," says she, "the Louis Treize period, one piece. If there is much like that, no collection in the world can match it."

"Hm-m-m-m!" says Old Hickory. "I am rather interested in that sort of thing myself. Then there is the bullion. Of course, if it should turn out to be part of the Louisiana Purchase money, and it became known that it had been recovered, I suppose the federal gov-

ernment would step in, perhaps claim the larger share."

"That would be an outrage," says Auntie. "There's no sense in that, not a bit. You—you mean you would give the information—that is, unless—"

"I never make threats," says Old Hickory, "even when I think I have been cheated out of doing something I've wanted all my life to have a try at."

It's Auntie's turn to stare at him. And hanged if she don't sort of mellow up.

"Really?" says she. "I—I had no idea. And it would be fun, wouldn't it, sailing off for that enchanted coast to hunt for a real treasure island?"

" 'Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!' " roars out Mr. Ellins.

It's the battiest remark I ever heard him make. I was lookin' for Auntie to throw some sort of a fit. But she don't. She comes nearer chucklin' than anything else.

"Mr. Ellins," says she, "I think perhaps I have misjudged you. And I—I suppose I really ought not to attempt such a thing alone. Shall we—er—"

"Why not?" says he, reachin' out his hand. "Share and share alike."

"Agreed!" says Auntie. "And now, sup-

pose we get the Captain and look for that yacht."

They was so anxious to get at it that they chases off without a word to either Vee or me. She just sits there starin' after 'em.

"Did anyone ever hear of anything quite so absurd?" says Vee.

"I don't know," says I. "I never worked in a filbert factory myself. I'm sure of one thing, though. With them two on the job, it's goin' to be put up to Rupert to come across.

CHAPTER XI

A JOLT FROM OLD HICKORY

You know Old Hickory Ellins ain't what you might call a sunshine distributor. His disposition would hardly remind you of a placid pool at morn, or the end of a perfect day. Not as a rule. Sort of a cross between a March blizzard and a July thunderstorm would hit it nearer.

Honest, sometimes when he has started on a rampage through the general offices here, I've seen the bond-room clerks grip their desks like they expected to be blown through the windows; and the sickly green tinge on Piddie's face when he comes out from a hectic ten minutes with the big boss is as good a trouble barometer as you'd want.

Even on average days, when Corrugated affairs seem to be runnin' smooth, Mr. Ellins is apt to come down with a lumbago grouch or develop shootin' pains in the knee, and then anybody who ducks gettin' in range of that snappy sarcasm of his is lucky.

Not that he always means it, or that he's gen-

erally disliked. As soon as it's safe, the bond clerks grin at each other and the lady typists go to yankin' away on their gum placid. They know nobody's ever had the can tied to 'em from this joint without good cause. Also, they've come to expect about so many growls a day from Old Hickory.

But say, they don't know what to make of him this last week or so. Twice he's been late, three days runnin' he's quit early, and in all that time he ain't raised a blessed howl about anything. Not only that, but the other mornin' he blew in wearin' a carnation in his buttonhole and hummin' a tune. I saw Piddie watch him with his eyes bugged, and the battery of typists let out a sort of chorus gasp as the door of his private office shut behind him.

Finally Mr. Robert beckons me over and remarks confidential:

"Torchy, have you—er—noticed anything peculiar about the governor these last few days?"

"Could I help it?" says I.

"Ah!" says he. "Somewhat rare, such moods. I've been wondering. He has hinted to me that he might start on some sort of a cruise soon."

"Has he?" says I, tryin' to look surprised.

"You don't suppose, Torchy," Mr. Robert

goes on, "that the governor really means to go after that buried treasure?"

"Mr. Robert," says I, "I ain't sayin' a word."

"By Jove!" says he. "So that's the way it stands? Well, you haven't told me anything. And, do you know, I am beginning to think it would be a fine thing for him to do. It would get his mind off business, give him an outing, and—er—simplify our negotiations in that Ishpeming deal. I think I shall encourage his going."

"If you want to make it doubtful, I would," says I.

"Eh?" says Mr. Robert. "You mean—Well, I'm not sure but that you're right. I'll do just the opposite, then—suggest that he'll not like cruising, and remind him that the Corrugated has a critical season ahead of it. By the way, what sort of a boat has he chartered?"

"At last accounts," says I, "they hadn't found one that suited. You see, Auntie won't stand for a gasoline engine, and—"

"Do I understand that Mrs. Hemmingway is going, too?" gasps Mr. Robert.

I nods.

"She's one of the partners," says I. "Kind of a particular old girl, too, when it comes to yachts. I judge she wants something about

half way between a Cunarder and a ten-room flat; something wide and substantial."

Mr. Robert grins. "They ought to be told about the *Agnes,*" says he.

"What about her?" says I.

"Why," says he, "she's the marine antique that Ollie Wade inherited from his uncle, the old Commodore. A fine boat in her day, too, but a trifle obsolete now: steam, of course, and a scandalous coal eater. Slow, too; ten knots is her top speed. But she's a roomy, comfortable old tub, and Ollie would be glad to get her off his hands for a month or two. Suppose I—"

"Would you mind, Mr. Robert," I breaks in, "if I discovered the *Agnes* for 'em? I might boost my battin' average with Auntie; and maybe I could work Ollie for a commission."

"Here!" says Mr. Robert, shovin' over the desk 'phone. "Make him give you five per cent. at least. Here's his number."

So that's how it happens I come to be pilotin' this trio of treasure hunters—Auntie, Old Hickory, and Captain Rupert Killam—over to a South Brooklyn yacht basin and exhibitin' the *Agnes.* You'd never guess, either, from the way she's all painted up fresh, that she was the A. Y. C. flagship as far back as the early nineties.

"What a nice, wide boat!" says Auntie.

"Beam enough for a battleship," grumbles Rupert.

"I do hope," goes on Auntie, "that the staterooms are something more than cubbyholes."

"Let's take a look," says I, producin' the keys.

Ollie had mentioned specially the main saloon, but I wasn't lookin' for anything half so grand. Why, you could almost give a ball in it. Had a square piano and a fireplace, too.

"Huh!" says Old Hickory. "Quite a craft."

It was when we got to the two suites, one on each side of the companionway 'midships, that Auntie got real enthusiastic; for, besides the brass beds and full-sized bathtubs, they had clothes closets, easy chairs, and writin' desks.

"Excellent!" says she. "But what are those queer overhead pipes for, I wonder?"

"Must be for the cold-air system Mr. Wade was tellin' me about," says I.

"Oh, yes," adds Old Hickory. "I remember now. This is the boat Commodore Wade went up the Orinoco in, and he had her fitted for tropical cruising. How many staterooms in all, did you say, son?"

"Twelve, outside of the crew's quarters," says I.

"Regular floating hotel," says Old Hickory. "We shall not be crowded for room, Mrs. Hemmingway."

"Then why not ask some of our friends to go with us?" suggests Auntie. "There are one or two I should like to take along for companionship. And it will not look so much like an expedition if we make up a cruising party."

"Very well," says Old Hickory; "that's not a bad idea. We'll decide on this boat, then?"

Captain Killam tried to point out that the *Agnes* was a bigger craft than they needed, and that she didn't look as if she had much speed. But Auntie had already planned how she could camp comfortable in one of them suites, and Old Hickory had discovered that the yacht sported a wireless outfit. Hanged if each one of 'em didn't talk like they'd found the *Agnes* all by themselves, or had her built to order! I got about as much credit as if I hadn't been along at all.

I felt a little better about that two hours later, when I'd hunted up Ollie at his club, shoved a thousand dollar check at him, and got his name on a charter agreement.

"I say, you know," says Ollie, "awfully good of you to do this."

"I'm like that all the time," says I, pocketin'

my fifty commission. "I'll rent the *Agnes* out for you any old day, so long as I don't have to go battin' around on her myself."

Course, if it was just a case of sailin' down to Coney and back, or maybe runnin' up the Hudson as far as Yonkers, I'd take a chance. But this pikin' right out past Sandy Hook, and then goin' on for days and days, leavin' Broadway further behind every turn of the shaft—that's different. You're liable to get so far away.

Then, there's that wabbly feeling that comes over you. Say, I had it once, when I was out in an old lobster boat off the coast of Maine, the time I used my summer vacation chasin' up where Vee was visitin'. I had it good and plenty, too, and didn't have to go more'n a couple of miles to get it, either. But think of bein' that way for a couple of weeks, and out where you couldn't get ashore if you wanted to. Excuse me!

Besides, I never did have the travel bug very hard. I'll admit I ain't seen much of the country outside of New York; but say, what I have looked over struck me as bein' kind of crude. I expect fields and woods and the seaside stuff is all right for them that likes 'em. Make good pictures, and all that. But them places always seem to me such lonesome spots. Fine and

dandy, so far as the view goes, but nobody to it. I like my scenery sort of inhabited, and fixed so it can be lit up at night. So I do most of my travelin' between the Bronx and the Battery, and let it go at that.

Now Vee has been brought up different. She's chased round with Auntie all over the map, ever since she can remember. They don't mind startin' off with a maid and seven trunks and not seein' Fifth Avenue for months at a time. She and Auntie think nothing at all of driftin' into places like Nagasaki or Honolulu or Algiers, hirin' a furnished flat or a house, and campin' down just as if they belonged there; places where they speak all kinds of crazy languages, where ice-cream sodas don't grow at all, and where you don't even know what you're eatin' half the time. Think of that! But Auntie's an original old girl, take it from me.

"She ain't countin' on draggin' you off on this batty gold-diggin' excursion, is she?" I asks the other evenin', as I was up makin' my reg'lar Wednesday night call.

Vee shrugs her shoulders.

"I'm sure I don't know," says she. "You see, although she knows perfectly well I've heard all about it, Auntie makes a deep mystery of everything connected with this cruise

It's that absurd Captain Killam who puts her up to it, I believe."

"Romantic Rupert?" says I. "Oh, he's a soft-shell on that subject. Accordin' to his idea, anybody who overhears any details of this pirate treasure tale of his is liable to grab a dirt shovel and rush right off down there to begin diggin' Florida up by the roots. He loses sleep worryin' as to whether someone else won't get there first. It would be tough if Auntie should take you along, though. I'd hate that."

"Would you?" says Vee. "Really? Well, I've been asked to visit at three places—Greenwich, Piping Rock, and here in town. How would that be?"

"Not so bad," says I, "specially that last proposition. I'm strong for your visitin' here in town."

"Perhaps we shall hear to-night whether I'm to go or not," says Vee. "They are to hold some sort of meeting here—everyone who has been asked on the cruise. There's someone now."

"It's Mr. Ellins," says I, "and— Oh, look who he's towin' along—J. Dudley Simms. He must be for comic relief."

Just why him and Old Hickory should be such great friends I never could make out, for

they're about as much alike as T and S. Dudley's as thin as Mr. Ellins is thick; he always wears that batty twisted smile, while Old Hickory's mouth corners are generally straight, and he knows no more about finance than an ostrich does about playin' first base. Mr. Simms owns a big block of Corrugated preferred, and he's supposed to be on the Board; but all he ever does is to sign over proxy slips and duck directors' meetin's.

"I'm an orphan, you know," is his stock remark when anyone tries to talk business to him.

Even if he didn't wear gray spats and a wide ribbon on his eyeglasses, you'd spot him for a funny gink by the offset ears and the odd way he has of carryin' his head a little to one side.

"What a queer-looking person!" whispers Vee.

"Wait until you hear him spring some of his nutty conversation," says I.

By this time the bell buzzes again, and Helma shows in a dumpy little woman with partly gray hair and Baldwin apple cheeks—evidently a friend of Auntie's by the way they go to a clinch.

"Mrs. Mumford," says Vee.

"Auntie's donation to the party, eh?" says I. "Just listen to her coo!"

"S-s-sh!" says Vee, snickerin'.

That's what it was, though—cooin'. Seems to be her specialty, too, for she goes bobbin' and bowin' around the room, makin' noises like a turtle-dove on a top branch.

"O-o-o-oh, Mr. Ellins!" says she. "So glad to know you. O-o-o-oh!" And she smiles and ducks her head and beams gushy on everyone in sight.

"How long can she keep that up on a stretch?" I asks Vee.

"Indefinitely," says Vee. "It's quite natural, you know. For, really, she's an old dear, but a bit tiresome. If she goes she will knit or crochet the whole blessed time, no matter what happens. She crocheted all over Europe with us one summer. Fancy facing the Matterhorn and counting stitches! But Mrs. Mumford did it."

"Then she'll be a great help on their cruise, I don't think," says I.

"Oh, but she will," says Vee. "You see, she always agrees with everything Auntie says, and very few can do that. Well, here comes Professor Leonidas Barr, too. You might know Auntie would want him along."

"What's he luggin' his hat in for?" says I. "Don't he trust Helma?"

"It's because he's afraid he'll walk out without it," says Vee. "But he'll do that, anyway. And he leaves it in the weirdest places —under the piano, in a vase, or back of the fire screen. We always have a grand hunt for the Professor's hat when he starts to go. But it's no wonder he forgets such trifles, when he knows so much about fishes. He writes books about 'em."

"He looks it," says I. "And, last but not least, we have arriving Captain Rupert Killam, who started all this trouble. My, but he takes life serious, don't he?"

From where we sat in the library window alcove, we could get a fair view of the bunch up front, and I must say that the last thing in the world you'd ever expect this collection to do would be to go cruisin' off after pirate gold. Here they were, though, gathered in Auntie's drawin'-room, and if the idea of the meetin' wasn't to hear details about the trip, what was it?

I was expectin' Auntie to have the foldin' doors shut and an executive session called; but she either forgot we was there, or else she was too excited to notice it, for the next thing we knew she was callin' on Mr. Ellins to state the

proposition. Which he does in his usual crisp way.

"You have been asked," says he, "to go with us on a cruise to the west coast of Florida. That is all you are supposed to know about it, according to Captain Killam's notion. But that's nonsense. I, for one, don't intend to keep up an air of mysterious secrecy for the next three or four weeks. As a matter of fact, we are going after hidden treasure—pirate gold, buried jewels, all that sort of thing."

"O-o-o-oh!" coos Mrs. Mumford. "Doesn't that sound deliciously romantic?"

"Quixotic if you will," says Mr. Ellins. "But Mrs. Hemmingway and myself, although we may not look it, are just that kind. We are desperate characters, if the truth must be told. The only reason we haven't hunted for buried treasure before is that we have lacked the opportunity. We think we have it now. Captain Killam, here, has told us of an island on which is a buried pirate hoard—millions in gold, priceless jewels by the peck. And that's what we're going after."

"Most interesting, I'm sure," says Professor Barr, wipin' his glasses absent-minded with a corner of Mrs. Mumford's shoulder scarf.

"But, I say," puts in J. Dudley Simms, "I'll not be any help at digging, you know."

"Has anyone ever suspected you of being useful in any capacity?" demands Old Hickory.

"Oh, come!" protests Dudley. "I play a fair game of bridge, don't I?"

"Exception allowed," says Mr. Ellins. "And I may say, to quiet any similar fears, that the entire burden of the treasure hunt will be undertaken by Mrs. Hemmingway, the Captain, and myself. Incidentally, we expect to divide the spoils among ourselves. Aside from that, we ask you to share with us the pleasure and perhaps the perils of the trip."

"O-o-o-oh!" coos Mrs. Mumford, meanin' nothing at all.

"We have secured a good-sized, comfortable yacht," goes on Old Hickory. "You will each have a stateroom, assigned by lot. Meal hours and the menu will be left to the discretion of a competent steward.

"We sail on Wednesday, promptly at 11 A.M. Just when we shall return I can't say. It may be in a month, possibly two. You will need to dress for the tropics—thin clothing, sun helmets, colored glasses, all that sort of thing.

"And you need not be surprised to learn that the yacht is somewhat heavily armed. On the forward deck you will see something wrapped in canvas. To anticipate your curiosity I will state now that this is a machine for making

and distributing poisonous gas, as our treasure island is infested with rattlesnakes and mosquitos. It may also be useful in discouraging anyone who tries to interfere with our enterprise. Am I correct, Captain Killam?"

"Quite," says Rupert, noddin' his head solemn.

"And now," says Old Hickory, "having been thoroughly frank with you, I ask that this information be treated as confidential. Also, will any of you who wish to reconsider your acceptances kindly say so at once? How about you, Simms?"

"As you know, Ellins," says J. Dudley, "I am a timid, fearsome person. Do I understand that you three assume all responsibility, all risks?"

"Absolutely," says Mr. Ellins.

"Then here is an opportunity to indulge in vicarious adventure," says Dudley, "which I can't afford to miss. I'll go; but I shall expect when the time comes, Ellins, that you will conduct yourself in an utterly reckless manner, while I watch you through a porthole."

"And you, Professor?" goes on Mr. Ellins.

"If I can secure a specimen of the *rivoluta splendens,*" says Leonidas, "I shall gladly take any chances."

"Isn't the dear Professor just too heroic?"

coos Mrs. Mumford. "It will be worth while going merely to see what a *rivoluta splendens* really is."

"We seem to be agreed," says Old Hickory, "and our company is made up. That is, with two exceptions."

"Great Scott!" I whispers to Vee. "Two more freaks to come!"

"Listen," says Vee. "Auntie is saying something."

So she is, a whole mouthful.

"My niece, Verona, will accompany me, of course," she announces.

"Well, ain't that rough!" says I. "Now what's the sense in draggin' you off down—"

"And I am obliged," breaks in Mr. Ellins, "to take with me, for purely business reasons, my private secretary. Mrs. Hemmingway, isn't the young man somewhere about the place?"

"Good night!" I gasps. "Me!"

"Well, I like that!" says Vee, givin' me a pinch.

"Take it back," says I. "If it's a case of us goin', that's different. But what a bunch to go cruisin' with!"

And say, when I'm led out and introduced, I must have acted like I was in a trance. I got it so sudden, you see, and so unexpected. Here I'd been sittin' back all the while and knockin'

this whole thing as a squirrel-house expedition, besides passin' comments on the crowd; and the next thing I know I'm counted in, with my name on the passenger list.

That was two days ago; and while I've been movin' around lively enough ever since, windin' things up at the office, hirin' a wireless operator for Mr. Ellins, and layin' in a stock of Palm Beach suits and white deck shoes, I ain't got over the jolt yet.

"Say, Mr. Robert," says I, when no one else is around, "how long can anybody be seasick and live through it?"

"Oh, it is seldom fatal," says he. "The victims linger on and on."

"Hal-lup!" says I. "And I'll bet that roly-poly Mrs. Mumford comes twice a day to coo to me. What did I ever get let in on this private seccing for, anyway?"

CHAPTER XII

TORCHY HITS THE HIGH SEAS

WELL, I got to take it all back—most of it, anyway. For, between you and me, this bein' a seagoing private sec. ain't the worst that can happen. Not so far as I've seen.

What I'm most chesty over, though, is the fact that I've been through the wop and wiggle test without feedin' the fishes. You see, when the good yacht *Agnes* leaves Battery Park behind, slides down past Staten Island and the Hook, and out into the Ambrose Channel, I'm feelin' sort of low. I'd been lookin' our course up on the map, and, believe me, from where New York leaves off to where the tip end of Florida juts out into the Gulf Stream is some wide and watery jump. No places to get off at in between, so far as I can dope out. It's just a case of buttin' right out into the Atlantic and keepin' on and on.

We hadn't got past Scotland Lightship before the *Agnes* begins that monotonous heave-and-drop stunt. Course, it ain't any motion worth mentionin', but somehow it sort

of surprises you to find that it keeps up so constant. It's up and down, up and down, steady as the tick of a clock; and every time you glance over the rail or through a porthole you see it's quite a ride you take. I didn't mind goin' up a bit; it's that blamed feelin' of bein' let down that's annoyin'.

For a while there I was more or less busy helping Old Hickory get his floating office straightened out and taking down a few code messages for the wireless man to send back to the general offices while we was still within easy strikin' distance. It was when I planted myself in a wicker chair 'way back by the stern, and begun watchin' that slow, regular lift and dip of the deck, that I felt this lump come in my throat and begun wonderin' what it was I'd had for lunch that I shouldn't. My head felt kind of mean, too, sort of dull and throbby, and I expect I wasn't as ruddy in the face as I might have been.

Then up comes Vee, lookin' as fresh and nifty as if she was just steppin' out on the Avenue; and before I can duck behind anything she's spotted me.

"Why, Torchy," says she, "you don't mean to say you're feeling badly already! Or is it because you're leaving New York?"

Then I saw my alibi. I sighs and gazes mushy back towards the land.

"I can't help it," says I. "I think a heap of that little old burg. It—it's been mother and father to me—all that sort of thing. I've hardly ever been away from it, you know, and I—I—" Here I smiles sad and makes a stab at swallowin' the lump.

"What a goose!" says Vee, but pats me soothin' on the shoulder. "Come, let's do a few turns around the deck."

"Thanks," says I, "but I guess I'd better just sit here quiet and—and try to forget."

"Nonsense!" says Vee. "That's a silly way to act. Besides, you ought to tramp around and get the feel of the boat. You'll be noticing the motion if you don't."

"Pooh!" says I. "What this old boat does is beneath my notice. She's headed away from Broadway, that's all I know about her. But if you want someone to trail around the deck with, I'm ready. Only I ain't apt to be very cheerful, not for a while yet."

Say, that dope of Vee's about gettin' the feel of the boat was a good hunch. Once you get it in your legs the soggy feelin' under your vest begins to let up. Also your head clears. Why, inside of half an hour I'm steppin' out brisk with my chin up, breathin' in great

chunks of salt air and meetin' that heave of the deck as natural as if I'd walked on rubber pavements all my life. After that, whenever I got to havin' any of them up and down sensations in the plumbin' department, I dashed for the open air and walked it down.

Lucky I could, too; for about Friday afternoon we ran into some weather that was the real thing. It had been cloudy most of the mornin', with the wind makin' up, and around three o'clock there was whitecaps as far as you could see. Nothin' monotonous or reg'lar about the motion of the *Agnes* then. She'd lift up on one of them big waves like she was stretchin' her neck to see over the top; then, as it rolled under her, she'd tip to one side until it looked like she was tryin' to spill us, and she'd slide down into a soapsudsy hollow until she met a solid wall of green water.

"This is what we generally get off Hatteras," says Vee, who has shown up in a green oiled silk outfit and has joined me in a sheltered spot under the bridge. "Isn't it perfectly gorgeous?"

"It's all right for once," says I, "providin' it don't last too long. Everyone below enjoyin' it, are they?"

"Oh, Auntie's been in her berth for hours," says Vee. "She never takes any chances. But

Mrs. Mumford tried to sit up and crochet. Helma's trying to take care of her, and she can hardly hold her head up. They are both quite sure they're going to die at once. You should hear them taking on."

"How is it this don't get you, too?" says I.

"I've always been a good sailor," says Vee. "And, anyway, a storm is too thrilling to waste the time being seasick. I always want to stay up around, too, and repeat that little verse of Kipling's. You know—

> 'When the cabin portholes are dark and green,
> Because of the seas outside,
> When the ship goes wop with a wiggle between,
> And the cook falls into the soup tureen,
> And the trunks begin to slide—'

Doesn't that just describe it, though—that 'wop with a wiggle between'?"

"As good as a thousand feet of film," says I. "Kip must have had some of this fun himself. Here comes a wop for us. There! Great, eh?"

I hope I made it convincin'; but, as a matter of fact, I had to force the enthusiasm a bit.

Not that I was scared, exactly; but now and then, when the *Agnes* sidled downhill and buried the whole front end of her in a wave that looked like a side elevation of the Flatiron Building, I'd have a panicky thought as to

whether some time she wouldn't forget to come up again.

She never did, though. No matter how hard she was soused under, she'd shake it off with a shiver and go on climbin' up again patient.

There was several vacant chairs at the dinner-table, and when I finally crawled into my bunk about 9:30 I had to brace myself to keep from bein' slopped out on the floor.

I was wonderin' whether I'd be too sick to answer the shipwreck call when it came, and I tried to figure out how I'd feel bouncin' around on them skyscraper waves draped in thin pajamas and a life belt, until I must have dropped off to sleep.

And, take it from me, when I woke up and saw the good old sunshine streamin' in through the porthole, and discovered that I was still alive and had an appetite for breakfast, I was as thankful a private sec. as ever tore open a pay envelope.

By the time I got dressed and found that the *Agnes* was doin' only the gentle wallow act, with the wop and wiggle left out, I begun to get chesty. I decides that I'm some grand little sailor myself, and I looks around for a willin' ear that I can whisper the news into.

The only person on deck, though, is Captain

Rupert Killam, who's pacin' up and down, lookin' mysterious, as usual.

"Well, Cap," says I. "Looked like it was goin' to be a little rough for a spell there last night, eh?"

"Rough?" says he. "Oh, we did have a little bobble off Hatteras—just a bobble."

"Huh!" says I. "I don't expect you'd admit anything's happenin' until a boat begins to turn flip-flops. Do you know, Rupert, there's times when you make me sad in the spine. Honest, now, you didn't invent the ocean, did you?"

But Rupert just stares haughty and walks off.

I've been afraid all along he didn't appreciate me; in fact, ever since he first showed up at the Corrugated, and I kidded him about his buried treasure tale, he's looked on me with a cold and suspicious eye.

Course, that's his specialty, workin' up suspicions. He's been at it right along, ever since the *Agnes* was tied loose from her pier; and outside of Auntie and Mr. Ellins, who are backin' this treasure hunt, I don't think there's a single party aboard that he hasn't given the sleuthy once-over to.

I understand he was dead set against takin' any outsiders along from the first, even pro-

testin' against Mrs. Mumford and old Professor Leonidas Barr. I expect his merry little idea is that they might get their heads together, steal the map showin' where all that pirate gold is buried, murder the rest of us, and dig up the loot themselves. Something like that.

Anyway, Rupert is always snoopin' around, bobbin' out unexpected and pussy-footin' up behind you when you're talkin' to anyone. I didn't notice his antics the first day or so, but after that he sort of got on my nerves—specially after the weather quit actin' up and it come off warmer. Then folks got thicker on the rear deck. Mrs. Mumford with her crochet, Auntie with her correspondence pad, the Professor with his books, and so on, which was why me and Vee took to huntin' for little nooks where we could have private chats. You know how it is.

There was one place 'way up in the bow, between the big anchors, and another on the little boat deck, right back of the bridge. But, just as we'd get nicely settled, we'd hear a creak-creak, and here would come Rupert nosing around.

"Lookin' for anybody special?" I'd ask him.

"Why—er—no," says Rupert.

"Then you'll find 'em in the main saloon," says I, "two flights down. Mind your step."

But you couldn't discourage Captain Killam that way. Next time it would be the same old story.

"Of all the gutta-percha ears!" says I to Vee. "He must think we're plottin' something deep."

"Let's pretend we are," says Vee.

"Or give him a steer that'll keep him busy, eh?" says I.

So you see it started innocent enough. I worked out the details durin' the night, and next mornin' my first move is to make the plant. First I hunts up Old Hickory's particular friend, J. Dudley Simms, him with the starey eyes and the twisted smile. For some reason or other, Rupert hadn't bothered him much. Too simple in the face, I expect.

But Dudley ain't half so simple as he looks or listens. In his own particular way he seems to be enjoyin' this yachtin' trip huge, just loafin' around elegant in his white flannels, smokin' cigarettes continual, soppin' up brandy-and-soda at reg'lar intervals, and entertainin' Mr. Ellins with his batty remarks.

The only thing that appears to bother Dudley at all about bein' cut off this way from the world in general is the lack of a stock ticker aboard. Seems he'd loaded up with a certain war baby before sailin', and while the deal

wouldn't either make or break him, he had a sportin' interest in which way the market was waverin'.

"Well, how do you guess Consolidated Munitions closed yesterday?" I asks.

Dudley shakes his head mournful.

"I dreamed last night of seeing a flock of doves," says he. "That's a bad sign. I'd give a dollar for a glimpse at a morning paper."

"They say Charleston's only a couple hundred miles off there," says I. "If it wasn't so soggy walkin' I'd run in and get you one."

"No," says he; "you'd be late for breakfast. I wonder if our wireless man couldn't get in touch with some of the shore stations."

"Sure he could," says I, "but don't let on what stock you're plungin' on. His name's Meyers. He's a hyphen, you know. And if he got wise to your havin' war-baby shares he'd likely hold out on you. But you might jolly him into gettin' a general quotation list. I'd stick around this forenoon if I was you."

"By Jove!" says J. Dudley. "I will."

And maybe you know how welcome any new way of killin' time can be when you're out on a boat with nothin' doin' but three or four calls to grub a day. Dudley goes it strong. He plants himself in a chair just outside the wireless man's little coop, and begins feedin'

Meyers monogrammed cigarettes and frivolous anecdotes of his past life.

Havin' the scene set like that made it easy. All I has to do is sketch out the plot to Vee and wait for Rupert to come gum-shoein' around.

"Just follow my lead, that's all," says I, as we fixes some seat cushions in the shade of one of the lifeboats on the upper deck. "And when you spot him—"

"He's coming up now," whispers Vee.

"Then here goes for improvisin' a mystery," says I. "Is he near enough?"

Vee glances over her shoulder.

"Go on," says she. Then, a bit louder: "Tell—tell me the worst, Torchy."

"I ain't sure yet," says I, "but take it from me there's something bein' hatched on this yacht besides cold-storage eggs."

"Hatched?" says Vee.

"S-s-s-sh!" says I. "Underhanded work; mutiny, maybe."

"O-o-o-oh!" says Vee, givin' a little squeal. "Who could do anything like that?"

"I'm not saying," says I; "but there's a certain party who ain't just what he seems. You'd never guess, either. But just keep your eye on J. Dudley."

"Wh-a-at!" gasps Vee. "Mr. Simms?"

"Uh-huh," says I. "Listen. He knows about Nunca Secos Key, don't he? And about the gold and jewels there?"

"That's so," says Vee. "But so do all of us. Only we don't know just where the island is."

"Suppose Dudley had buffaloed Old Hickory into showin' him the map?"

"Well?" demands Vee.

"Wouldn't it be easy enough," I goes on, "if he had pals ashore, to pass on the description, have them start out in a fast yacht from New Orleans or Key West, and beat us to it?"

"But I don't see," says Vee, "how he could get word to them."

"Look!" says I, pointin' to the wireless gridiron over our heads. "Where do you guess he is now?"

Vee shakes her head.

"Gettin' in his fine work with Meyers," says I. "He's been at it ever since breakfast."

"Think of that!" says Vee. "And you believe he means to—"

"S-s-s-sh!" says I. "Someone might be rubberin'."

Does it work? Say, when I gets up to scout around, Rupert has disappeared, and for the first time since we've been aboard he leaves us alone for the rest of the forenoon. We didn't

hate that exactly. Vee reads some out of a book, draws sketches of me, and we has long talks about—well, about a lot of things.

Anyway, I'm strong for this yacht-cruisin' stuff when there's no Rupert interference. It's so sort of chummy. And with a girl like Vee to share it with—well, I don't care how long it lasts, that's all.

And the next thing we knows there goes the luncheon gong. As we climbs down to the main deck where we can get a view forward, Vee gives me a nudge and snickers. J. Dudley Simms is still roostin' alongside the wireless cabin; and just beyond, crouched behind a stanchion with one ear juttin' out, is Captain Killam.

"Fine!" says I. "Rupert's got a steady job, eh?"

About then the other folks commence mobilizin' for a drive on the dinin'-room, and someone calls Dudley to come along.

"Just a moment," says he, scribblin' on a pad. "There!" and he hands a message over to Meyers.

"Ha, ha!" says a hoarse voice behind him.

Then things happened quick. Rupert makes a sudden pounce. He grabs Dudley, pinnin' his arms to his sides, and starts weavin' a rope around him.

"Oh, I say!" says Dudley. "What the deuce?"

"Traitor!" hisses Rupert dramatic. "You will, will you?"

J. Dudley may look like a Percy boy, too, but he ain't one to stand bein' wrapped up like a parcels-post package, or for the hissin' act—not when he's in the dark as to what it's all about. He just naturally cuts loose with the rough stuff himself. A skillful squirm or two, and he gets his elbows loose. Then, when he gets a close-up of who's tryin' to snare him, he pushes a snappy left in on Rupert's nose.

"Go away, fellow!" remarks Dudley.

"Snake in the grass!" says Rupert.

Then they clinched and begun rollin' over on the deck, clawin' each other. Course, Mrs. Mumford lets out a few frantic squeals and slumps in a faint. Professor Leonidas Barr starts wringin' his hands and groanin', "Oh, dear! Oh, dear, dear!" Auntie, she just stands there gaspin' and tryin' to unlimber her lorgnette.

As for Old Hickory, he watches the proceedin's breathless for a second or so before he can make out what's happenin'. Then he roars:

"Hey, stop 'em, somebody! Stop 'em, I say!"

That listened to me like my cue, and while I've never been strong for mixin' in a muss, I jumped into this one lively. And between me and the deck steward haulin' one way, and Meyers and Mr. Ellins pullin' the other, we finally pries 'em apart, breathin' hard and glarin' menacin'.

"Now, in the name of Mars," demands Old Hickory, "what the sulphuretted syntax is this all about? Come, Captain Killam, you started this; tell us why."

"He—he's a traitor, that's why!" pants Rupert, pointin' at Dudley.

"Bah!" says Old Hickory. "Whaddye mean, traitor?"

"He's plotting to send confederates to Nunca Secos Key before we get there," says Rupert. "Plotting to steal our buried treasure. See! He was just sending a message to some of his gang."

"Eh!" snorts Mr. Ellins. "A message?"

Meyers fishes it out of his pocket and hands it over.

"Huh!" says Old Hickory, puzzlin' it out. "'Advise how infant is doing. Send care yacht *Agnes,* off Charleston.' Dudley, what infant is this?"

Dudley grins sheepish. "Consolidated Munitions," says he.

"Oh!" says Old Hickory. "A war infant, eh? I see." Then he whirls on Rupert. "And by what idiotic inference, Killam, did you conjure up this rubbish about a plot?"

Rupert, he turns and stares indignant at me. Old Hickory follows the accusin' look, and next thing I know I'm in the spot light for fair.

"Hah!" observes Mr. Ellins. "You, eh?"

Now, there's only one rule I got for dealin' with the big boss. I stick to facts and make 'em snappy.

"Uh-huh," says I. "Me."

"You thought it humorous, I presume," he goes on, "to tell this silly yarn to Captain Killam?"

"But he didn't," speaks up Vee. "He was telling it to me; that is, we were telling it to each other—making it up as we went along. So there!"

"Oh!" says Mr. Ellins. "And the Captain happened to overhear, did he?"

"Happened!" says I. "Like you happen to climb a fire-escape. That's Rupert's long suit —overhearin' things. He's been favorin' us a lot lately."

"What about that, Killam?" asks Mr. Ellins.

"Why—er—ah—" stutters Rupert, "perhaps I have. But when you see two persons

getting off by themselves and talking so much together, you naturally—''

''Bah!'' explodes Old Hickory. ''Can't you remember back to nineteen, Killam?'' Then he turns to me. ''So you concocted this plot story for Captain Killam's benefit, did you?''

I nods.

''I thought it would keep him off our heels for a while,'' says I. ''I fed him an earful, I guess.''

''Young man,'' says Mr. Ellins, shakin' a forefinger at me, but lettin' his left eyelid drop knowin', ''the next time I find that imagination of yours running loose I—I'll authorize Captain Killam to catch it and put it in irons. Now let's have luncheon.''

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN THE NAVY HORNED IN

One thing about this yacht-cruisin' act is how close a line you get on the people you're shut up with. Why, this cross-mated bunch of ours hadn't been out in the *Agnes* more'n three days before I could have told you the life hist'ry of 'most everyone in the party.

I knew that the late Mr. Mumford had been a noble soul who wore full face lambrequins and was fussy about his food. From the picture Mrs. Mumford showed Vee and me, I judged he must have looked like an upstate banker; but come to get down to cases, she admits he was in the coal and lumber business over in Montclair, New Jersey.

About J. Dudley Simms I dug up all kinds of information. He'd been brought up by an old uncle who'd made a million or so runnin' an ale brewery and who had a merry little dream that he was educatin' J. Dudley to be a minister. If he'd lasted a couple of years longer, too, it would have been the Rev. J. Dudley Simms for a fact; but when uncle

cashed in, Dudley left the divinity school abrupt and forgot ever to go back.

I even discovered that Professor Leonidas Barr, the fish expert and Old Hickory's cribbage partner, had once worked in a shoe store and could still guess the size of a young lady's foot by lookin' at her hands. But when it came to collectin' any new dope about Captain Killam, he's still Rupert the Mysterious.

Durin' them long days when we went churnin' steady and monotonous down towards the hook end of Florida, with nothin' happenin' but sleep and meals, 'most everybody sort of drifted together and got folksy. Not Rupert, though. He don't forget for a minute that he's conductin' a dark and desperate hunt for pirate gold, and he don't seem contented unless he's workin' at it every hour of the day.

Course, after he's pulled that break of tacklin' J. Dudley for a mutiny plotter, Old Hickory shuts down on his sleuthin' around the decks, so he takes it out in gazin' suspicious at the horizon through a pair of field glasses he always wears strapped to him. Don't seem to cheer him up any, either, to have me ask him frivolous questions.

"Can you spot any movie shows or hot-dog wagons out there, Cap'n?" I asks.

He just glares peevish and declines to answer.

"What you lookin' for, anyway?" I goes on.

"Nothing I care to discuss with you, I think," says he.

"Bing-g-g," says I. "Right on the wrist!"

And then all of a sudden Mrs. Mumford gets hipped with the idea that Rupert is sort of bein' neglected. Well, trust her. She's been a sunshine worker and a social uplifter all her life. And no sooner does she get sympathizin' with Rupert than she starts plannin' ways of chirkin' him up.

"The poor dear Captain!" she gurgles gushy. "He seems so lonely and sad. Who knows what his past has been, how many dangers he has faced, what ordeals he has been through? If someone could only get him to talk about them, it might help."

"Why not tackle him, then?" says I. "Nobody could do it better than you."

"Oh, really now!" protests Mrs. Mumford, duckin' her chin kittenish. "I—I couldn't do it alone. Perhaps, though, if you young people would—"

"Oh, we will; won't we, Torchy?" says Vee.

I nods. Inside of half an hour, too, we had towed Rupert into a corner beside the widow and had him surrounded.

"Tell me, Captain," says Mrs. Mumford impulsive, "have you not led a most romantic life?"

Rupert rolls his eyes at her quick, then steadies 'em down and blinks solemn. Kind of weird, starey eyes, them buttermilk blue panes of his are.

"I—I don't say much about it, as a rule," says he, droppin' his eyelids modest.

"There!" exclaims Mrs. Mumford. "I just knew it was so. One daring adventure after another, I suppose, with no thought of fear."

"Oh, I've been afraid plenty of times," says Rupert, "but somehow I— Well, I've gone on."

"Isn't he splendid?" asks Mrs. Mumford, turnin' to us. "Just like a hero in a book! But we would like to know from the very beginning. As a boy, now?"

"There wasn't much," protests Rupert. "You see, I lived in a little town in southern Illinois. Father ran a general store. I had to help in it—sold shingle nails, molasses, mower teeth, overalls. How I hated that! But there was the creek and the muck pond. I had an old boat. I played smuggler and pirate. I used to love to read pirate books. I wanted to go to sea."

"So you ran away and became a sailor,"

adds Mrs. Mumford, clappin' her hands enthusiastic.

"I planned to lots of times," says Rupert, "but father made me go through the academy. Then afterwards I had to teach school—in a rough district. Once some big boys tried to throw me into a snowdrift. We had a terrible fight."

"It must have been awful," says Mrs. Mumford. "Those big, brutal boys! I can just see them. Did—did you kill any of them?"

"I hit one on the nose quite hard," says Rupert. "Then, of course, I had to give up teaching. I meant to start off for sea that winter, but father was taken sick. Lungs, you know. So we sold out the store and bought a place down in Florida, an orange grove. It was on the west coast, near the Gulf.

"That's where I learned to sail. And after father died I took my share of what he left us and bought a cruising boat. I didn't like working on the grove—messing around with smelly fertilizer, sawing off dead limbs, doing all that silly spraying. And my brother Jim could do it so much better. So I fished and took out winter tourists on excursions: things like that. Summers I'd go cruising down the coast. I would be gone for weeks at a time. I've been out in some fearful storms, too.

"I got to know a lot of strange characters who live on those west coast keys. They're bad, some of them—kill you for a few dollars. Others are real friendly, like the old fellow who told me about the buried treasure. He was almost dead of fever when I found him in his little palmetto shack. I got medicine for him, stayed until he was well. That's why he told me about the gold."

"Think of that!" says Mrs. Mumford. "He had been a pirate himself, hadn't he?"

"Well, hardly," says Rupert. "A tinsmith, I think he told me. He was a tough old citizen, though—an atheist or something like that. Very profane. Used chewing tobacco."

Mrs. Mumford shudders. "And you were alone with such a desperado, on a desert island!" she gasps, rollin' her eyes.

"Oh, I can generally look out for myself," says Rupert, tappin' his hip pocket.

He was fairly beamin', Rupert was, for Mrs. Mumford was not only lettin' him write his own ticket, but was biddin' his stock above par. And all the rest of the day he swells around chesty, starin' out at the ocean as important as if he owned it all.

"At last," says I, "we know the romance of Rupert."

"I hope it doesn't keep me awake nights," says Vee.

"Look at the bold, bad ex-school teacher," says I. "Wonder what blood-curdlin' mind plays he's indulgin' in now? There! He's unlimberin' the glasses again."

It must have been about four o'clock, for I remember hearin' eight bells strike and remarkin' to Vee what a silly way that was to keep track of time. We was watchin' Rupert go through his Columbus-discoverin'-Staten-Island motions, and I was workin' up some josh to hand him, when he comes rushin' back to the wireless room. No, we didn't stretch our ears intentional, and if we sidled up under the cabin window it must have been because there was a couple of deck chairs spread out convenient.

"Isn't that some kind of warship off there?" Captain Killam is demandin' of Meyers.

"Wait," says the operator, fittin' on his tin ear. "He's just calling." Then, after listenin' a while, he announces: "He wants to know who we are."

"Don't answer," orders Killam.

"Oh, all right," says Meyers, and goes on listenin'. Pretty soon, though, he gives out another bulletin.

"It's the United States gunboat *Petrel,* and

he's demanding who and what. Real snappy this time. Guess I'd better flash it to him, eh?"

"No, no!" says Rupert. "It's no business of his. This is a private yacht bound for a home port. Let him whistle."

It struck me at the time as a nutty thing to do, but of course I'm no judge. I had a hunch that Rupert was registerin' importance and showin' how he was boss of the expedition—something he hadn't a chance to get over before. It ain't long, though, before Meyers begins talkin' like he was uneasy.

"He wants to know," says he, "if our wireless is out of commission, and if it is why we don't run up a signal."

"Bah!" says Rupert. "These naval officers are too nosey. It'll do this one good if we take no notice of him."

"All the same," insists Meyers, "I think Mr. Ellins and the Captain ought to know what's going on."

"Oh, very well," says Rupert. "I'll call them down and we'll talk it over."

Course, we had to clear out then, for it's a secret confab of the whole executive committee that develops, includin' Auntie. But we got a full report later. It seems Rupert was skittish about havin' naval officers snoopin' around the yacht. For one thing, he don't want 'em to

find out that this is a treasure-huntin' cruise, on account of the government's bein' apt to hog part of the swag. Then, there's all them guns stowed away below. He explains how this *Petrel* is a slow old tub that he don't believe could overhaul the *Agnes* before dark. So why not make a run for it?

The reg'lar yacht captain was dead against anything like that. He wouldn't advise monkeyin' with the United States Navy, if they was askin' him. Better chuck the guns overboard. As for Old Hickory, he was sort of on the fence.

Who do you guess it was, though, that stood out for makin' the nervy getaway? Auntie. Uh-huh! All this panicky talk by Meyers and the yacht captain only warmed up her sportin' blood. What right, she wanted to know, had a snippy little gunboat to hold up a private party of perfectly good New Yorkers and ask 'em where they was goin'? Humph! What was the government, anyway? Just a lot of cheap officeholders who spent their time bothering our best people about customs duties and income taxes. For her part, she didn't care a snap about the navy. If the *Agnes* could get away, why not breeze ahead?

I expect that proposition must have appealed to Old Hickory, for he swung to her side at the last, and that's the way it was settled. They

decided to make no bones about what was up. Mr. Ellins calls us together and makes a little speech, sayin' if anybody don't like the prospect he's sorry, but it can't be helped.

Then the crew gets busy. Black smoke begins pourin' out of the stack and the engines are tuned up to top speed. All the awnin's are taken in and every flag pulled down. The *Agnes* proceeds to hump herself, too.

"Twelve knots," reports Old Hickory, inspectin' the patent log. "The Captain thinks he can get fourteen out of her. The *Petrel's* best is sixteen."

"At least, we have a good start," says Auntie, gazin' off where a thin smudge shows on the sky line. "And before they can get near enough to shoot they can't see us. I suppose they'd be just impudent enough to shoot if they could?"

"Oh, yes," says Old Hickory. "We're outlaws now, you know."

"Who cares?" says Auntie, shruggin' her shoulders.

Say, I wasn't so much surprised at Mr. Ellins. He's spent most of his life slippin' things over on the government. Auntie, though! A steady, solemn old girl with her pedigree printed in the Social Register. You wouldn't have thought it of her.

"Some plunger, Auntie, eh?" says I to Vee. "She don't seem to care what happens."

"I never knew she could be so reckless," says Vee. "Getting us chased by a warship! Isn't that rather dangerous, Torchy?"

"I shouldn't call it the mildest outdoor sport there was," says I.

"And the casual way she talks of our being shot at—as if they'd fire tennis balls!" goes on Vee.

"I didn't care for that part of the conversation myself," says I. "I'm no hero, like Rupert. If there's any shootin' takes place, I'm goin' to get nervous. I feel it comin' on."

"You don't think Auntie and Mr. Ellins would let it go that far, do you?" asks Vee.

"It would be just like Auntie to fire back," says I. "What's a navy more or less to her, when she gets her jaw set?"

"I—I wish I hadn't come on this old yacht," says Vee.

"If I could row you ashore," says I, "I wouldn't mind stayin' to keep you company. Look! That smoke off there's gettin' nearer."

If Auntie and Old Hickory was pinin' for thrills, it looked like they was due to get their wish. Just what would happen in case the *Agnes* was run down nobody seemed to know. The only thing our two old sports was inter-

ested in just then was this free-for-all race.

Anyway, we had a fine evenin' for it. The ocean was as smooth as a full bathtub, and all tinted up in pinks and purples, like one of Belasco's back drops. Off over the bow to the right—excuse me, to the starboard—a big, ruddy sun was droppin' slow and touchin' up the top of a fluffy pile of cottony clouds back of us, that looked like they was balanced right on the edge of things. Bang in the middle of that peaceful background, though, was this smear of black smoke, and you didn't have to be any marine dill pickle to tell it was headed our way.

We groups ourselves on the after deck and watches. Everybody that could annexes a pair of field glasses; but, even with that help, about all you could see was some white foam piled up against a gray bow. Now and then Rupert announces that she's gainin' on us, and Old Hickory nods his head.

"Only an hour until sunset, though," Auntie remarks.

"I suppose," suggests Rupert, "we could change our course after dark and slip into Miami Bay."

"No," says Old Hickory, waggin' his head stubborn. "We will hold our course right down through Florida Straits. We ought to make

Key West by morning, if we're not overhauled."

"If!" I whispers to Vee.

Dinner was announced, but for once there's no grand rush below. Mr. Ellins orders a hand-out meal to be passed around, and we fills up on sandwiches while keepin' watch on that black smudge, which is creepin' closer and closer. Don't take long for it to get dark down in this part of the country after the sun is doused, but the stars shine mighty bright. On the water, too, it seems so much lighter.

Then the *Petrel* turns on a couple of searchlights. Course, we was 'way out of range, but somehow it seemed like them swingin' streaks of light was goin' to reach out and pick us up any minute. For an hour or so we watched 'em feelin' for us, gettin' a bit nearer, reachin' and swingin', with the *Agnes* strainin' herself to slip away, but losin' a little of her lead every minute.

Must have been near ten o'clock when Rupert announces cheerful: "By George! She's falling behind. Those searchlights are getting dimmer."

"I believe you're right," says Old Hickory.

Half an hour more and there was no doubt about it.

"Humph!" says Auntie. "I was sure we we could do it."

And Mr. Ellins is so tickled that he orders up a couple of bottles of his best fizz, so all hands can drink to the U. S. Navy.

"Long may it wave," says J. Dudley Simms, "and may it always stick to its new motto—Safety First."

He got quite a hand on that, and then everybody turned in happy. As I went to sleep the *Agnes* was still joggin' along at her best gait, and it was comfortin' to know that our wrathy naval friends had been left hopelessly behind.

I expect I must have been poundin' my ear real industrious for five or six hours when I hears this distant *boom,* and comes up in my berth as sudden as if someone had pulled the string. Sunshine was streamin' in through the porthole, and I was just wonderin' if I'd slept right through the breakfast gong when *boom!* it came again. There's a rush of feet on deck, some panicky remarks from the man up in the bow, a quick clangin' of the engine-room bells, and then I feels the propellers reversed.

"Good night!" says I. "Pinched on the high seas!"

I didn't waste much time except to throw on a few clothes; but, at that, I finds Auntie scrab-

blin' out ahead of me and Captain Killam already on deck. She's a picturesque old girl, Auntie, in a lavender and white kimono and a boudoir cap to match; and Rupert, in blue trousers and a pajama top, hardly looks like a triple-plated hero.

"Nabbed!" gasps Rupert, starin' over the rail, at a gray gunboat that's just roundin' in towards us. It's the *Petrel*, sure enough.

"The idea!" says Auntie. "They were shooting at us, too, weren't they? Of all things!"

Then up pads Old Hickory in a low-necked silk dressin'-gown, with his gray hair all rumpled and a heavy crop of white stubble on his solid set jaws.

"Huh!" says he, takin' a glance at the *Petrel*.

That's about all there is to be said, too. For it was odd how little any of us felt like bein' chatty. We just stood around quiet and watched the businesslike motions on the *Petrel* as she stops about a block off and proceeds to drop a boat into the water.

Projectin' prominent from one of her steel bay windows is a wicked-lookin' gun about the size of a young water main, and behind it a lot of jackies squintin' at us earnest. And you know how still it seems on a boat when the

engines quit. I almost jumps when someone whispers in my ear. It's Vee.

"Now I hope Auntie's satisfied," says she.

"There's no tellin' about her," says I.

Anyway, she wasn't fannin' herself, or sniffin' smellin' salts. I'd noticed her hail a deck steward, and the next I knew she was spoonin' away at half a grapefruit, as calm as you please. Mr. Ellins is indulgin' in a dry smoke. Only Mrs. Mumford, when she finally appears, does justice to the situation. She rolls her eyes, breathes hard, and clutches her crochet bag desperate.

The *Petrel* people were takin' their time about things. After they got the boat in they had to let down some side stairs, and then the sailors waited with their oars ready until an officer in a fresh laundered white uniform gets in and gives the signal to shove off. Our Captain has the companionway stairs rigged, too, and there ain't a word passed until the naval gent comes aboard. He's rather a youngish party, with a round, good-natured face, and he seems kind of amused as he sizes up our bunch in their early mornin' costumes.

"Pardon me," says he, touchin' his cap, "but who is in charge of this yacht?"

"I suppose I am," says Old Hickory.

"Not a bit more than I," puts in Auntie.

"And I want to tell you right now, young man, that I consider your action in shooting off those guns at us was—"

"I presume you recognize the United States Navy, madam?" breaks in the officer.

"Not necessarily," snaps Auntie. "I don't in the least see why we should, I'm sure."

"Certainly we do," corrects Old Hickory. "But, as Mrs. Hemmingway observes, we dislike to be shot at."

"Even though you couldn't hit us," adds Auntie.

The officer grins.

"Oh, our gunners aren't as bad as that," says he. "We were merely shooting across your bows, you know. I am Lieutenant Commander Faulhaber, and it is part of my duty to overhaul and inspect any suspicious acting craft."

"Why didn't you do it last night, then?" demands Auntie.

"Because we blew out a cylinder gasket," says he. "The *Petrel* isn't a new boat, by any means, and hardly in first-class shape. But we managed to patch her up, you see."

"Humph!" says Auntie.

Honest, I was almost sorry for that naval gent before she got through with him, for she sure did state her opinion, free and forcible, of

his holdin' us up this way. He stands and takes it, too, until she's all through.

"Sorry you feel that way about it," says he, but I shall be obliged to make a thorough search of this boat, nevertheless. Also I shall require an explanation as to why you disregarded my wireless orders. Unless you can satisfy me that—"

It's about there this cheery hail comes from J. Dudley Simms, who is just appearin' from his stateroom, all dolled up complete in white flannels.

"By Jove!" he sings out. "If it isn't Folly. How are you, old man?"

The lieutenant commander swings around with a pleased look.

"Why—er—that you, Dud, old chap? Say, what are you these days? Blockade runner, smuggler, or what?"

"You're warm, Folly, you're warm!" says Dudley. "Hunting for buried treasure, that's our game—pirate gold—all that sort of thing."

And say, in less than two shakes he's given the whole snap away, in spite of Old Hickory scowlin' and Auntie glarin' like she meant to murder him with her grapefruit spoon.

But the news don't seem to impress Lieutenant Commander Faulhaber very serious.

"Not really?" says he, chucklin'. "Oh!

Then that's the reason for all this mystery? Treasure hunting! Well, well!" And he grins more expansive than ever as he takes another look around.

Next he's introduced proper to everybody, and inside of ten minutes we're all sitting down to breakfast together, while J. Dudley explains how him and Folly has been lifelong chums.

So we didn't get pinched, after all.

"Although," says the lieutenant commander, as he starts back towards the *Petrel*, "I suppose I ought to fine you for exceeding the speed limit."

The *Agnes* has got under way again, and we'd stopped wavin' good-by to the jackies, when I catches a glimpse of a head bein' poked cautious out from under the canvas cover of one of our lifeboats. Nudgin' Vee to look, I steps up to Mr. Ellins, who's talkin' with Auntie and Mrs. Mumford, and points out my discovery. By that time the head has been followed by a pair of shoulders.

Old Hickory just narrows his eyes and stares.

"Why!" gasps Mrs. Mumford, "it—it's Captain Killam!"

"Yep!" says I. "Rupert the Reckless. Only this trip he seems to be playin' it safe, eh?"

"In hiding!" says Auntie. "All the time, too!"

"Huh!" grunts Old Hickory, watchin' Killam crawl out and slip around a corner. But say, Mr. Ellins can make that "Huh!" of his mean a lot. He knows when he's been buffaloed, take it from me. My guess is that Rupert's stock is in for a bad slump. I'd quote him about thirty off and no bids.

CHAPTER XIV

AUNTIE TAKES A NIGHT OFF

It looked like a case of watchin' out for the stick to come down. Uh-huh! The good yacht *Agnes* had been tied to her anchor less than half a day when this grand treasure-huntin' expedition of ours showed symptoms of collapse. It was weak in the knees, groggy in its motions, and had fur on its tongue. If there'd ever been any stock issued by the Ellins-Hemmingway Exploration and Development Company, I'll bet you could have bought in a controllin' interest for two stacks of cigarette coupons and a handful of assorted campaign buttons.

You see, Old Hickory and Auntie had hung all their bright hopes on this Captain Rupert Killam. They'd listened to his tale about a secret mangrove island with a gold and jewel stuffed mound in the middle, and they'd taken it right off the fork. His mysterious and romantic motions had them completely buffaloed—at first.

But on the way down here Rupert's reputa-

tion as a bold, bad adventurer had gradually been oozin' away, like a slow air leak from a tire. His last play of hidin' his head when the *Agnes* had been held up by a gunboat had got 'most everybody aboard lookin' squint-eyed at him. Even Mrs. Mumford had crossed him off her hero list.

Just what his final fluke was I'm only givin' a guess at, but I judge that when Mr. Ellins called on him to point out the pirate hoard, now we were right on the ground, Rupert begun stallin' him off. Anyway, I saw 'em havin' a little private session 'way up in the bow soon after we got the hook down. By the set of Old Hickory's jaw I knew he was puttin' something straight up to Rupert. And the Cap, he points first one way, then the other, endin' by diggin' up a chart and gazin' at it vague.

"Huh!" grunts Old Hickory.

I could hear that clear back by the bridge, where Vee and I were leanin' over the rail watchin' for flyin'-fish. Also we are within ear-stretchin' distance when he makes his report to Auntie.

"Somewhere around here—he thinks," says Mr. Ellins. "Says he needs a day or so to get his bearings. Meanwhile he wants us to go fishing."

"Fish!" sniffs Auntie. "I shall certainly do

nothing of the sort. I want to tell you right here, too, that I am not going to humor that absurd person any more."

"Isn't he just as wise as he was when you lured him away from the hotel where I'd put him?" asks Old Hickory sarcastic.

"I supposed you had a little sense then yourself, Matthew Ellins," Auntie raps back at him.

"You flatter me," says Old Hickory, bowin' stiff and marchin' off huffy.

After which they both registers glum, injured looks. A close-up of either of 'em would have soured a can of condensed milk, especially whenever Captain Rupert Killam took a chance on showin' himself. And Rupert, he was wise to the situation. He couldn't help being. He takes it hard, too. All his chesty, important airs are gone. He skulks around like a stray pup that's dodgin' the dog-catcher.

You see, when he'd worked off that buried treasure bunk in New York it had listened sort of convincin'. He'd got away with it, there being nobody qualified to drop the flag on him. But down here on the west coast of Florida, right where he'd located the scene, it was his cue to ditch the prospectus gag and produce something real. And he couldn't. That is, he hadn't up to date. Old Hickory ain't the one

to put up with any pussy-footin'. Nor Auntie, either. When they ain't satisfied with things they have a habit of lettin' folks know just how they feel.

Hence this area of low pressure that seems to center around the *Agnes*. Old Hickory is off in one end of the boat, puffin' at his cigar savage; Auntie's at the other, glarin' into a book she's pretendin' to read; Mrs. Mumford is crochetin' silent; Professor Leonidas Barr is riggin' up some kind of a scientific dip net; J. Dudley Simms is down in the main saloon playin' solitaire; and Rupert sticks to the upper deck, where he's out of the way.

Vee and me? Oh, we got hold of a map, and was tryin' to locate just where we were.

"See, that must be Sanibel Island—the long green streak off there," says she, tracin' it out with a pink forefinger. "And that is Pine Island Sound, with the Caloos—Caloosa—"

"Now sneeze and you'll get the rest of it," says I.

"Caloosahatchee. There!" says she. "What a name to give a river! But isn't it wonderful down here, Torchy?"

"Perfectly swell, so far as the scenery goes," says I.

Course, it's a good deal like this 79-cent

pastel art stuff you see in the Sixth Avenue department stores. The water looks like it had been laid on by Bohemian glass blowers who didn't care how many colors they used. The little islands near by, with clumps of feather-duster palms stickin' up from 'em, was a bit stagey and artificial. The far-off shores was too vivid a green to be true, and the high white clouds was the impossible kind that Maxfield Parrish puts on magazine covers. And, with that dazzlin' sun blazin' overhead it all made your eyes blink.

Even the birds don't seem real. Not far from us was a row of these here pelicans—foolish things with bills a yard long and so heavy they have to rest 'em on their necks. They're all strung out along the edge of the channel, havin' a fish gorge. And, believe me, when a pelican goes fishin' he don't make any false moves. He'll sit there squintin' solemn at the water as if he was sayin' his prayers, then all of a sudden he'll make a jab with that face extension of his, and when he pulls it out and tosses it up you can bet your last jitney he's added something substantial to the larder. One gulp and it's all over. I watched one old bird tuck away about ten fish in as many minutes.

"Gee!" says I. "Every day is Friday with

him. Or maybe he's got a contract to supply Fulton Market."

The entertainin' part of the performance, though, was when the bunch took it into their heads to move on, and started to fly. They've got little short legs and wide feet that they flop back and forth foolish, like they was tryin' to kick themselves out of the water. They make a getaway about as graceful as a cow tryin' the fox trot. But say, once they get goin', with them big wings planed against the breeze, they can do the soar act something grand. And dive! One of 'em doin' a hundred-foot straight down plunge has got Annette lookin' like a plumber fallin' off a roof backwards.

No, there wasn't any gloom around our side of the yacht, though I'll admit it don't take much of a program to keep me amused while Vee has the next orchestra chair to mine. We took no notice of anybody's grouch, and whether or not there was any pirate gold in the neighborhood was a question we didn't waste thought on. We knew there wouldn't be anything in it for us, even if there was.

When the word was passed around that anybody that wanted to might get out and fish, we was the first to volunteer. Seems this had been the scheme right along—that our party

was to do more or less fishin', so as to give any natives that might be hangin' around the proper idea of why we was there.

Professor Barr is right on hand, too; and Dudley tries it just to kill time. We did have more or less luck, and got quite excited. Vee pulls in something all striped up like a hat-band, and one that I hooked blew himself up into a reg'lar football after I landed him in the bottom of the boat. The Professor had jaw-breakin' names for everything we caught, but he couldn't say whether they was good to eat or not. The yacht cook wouldn't take a chance on any of them. It was good sport, though, and we all collected a fresh coat of sunburn. And say, with them new tints in her cheeks, maybe Vee ain't some ornamental. But then, she's easy to look at anyway.

It was this same evenin', the second we'd been anchored quiet in behind this lengthy island, that the big three of our expedition gets together again. First I knew, I saw 'em grouped along the side where the companion-way stairs was swung—Auntie, Old Hickory, and Captan Killam. Rupert seems to be explainin' something. Then in a minute or two the men begin easin' Auntie down into one of the launches tied to the boat boom, and the next I see them go chuggin' off into the moon-

light. I hunts up Vee and passes her the word.

"What do you know about that?" says I. "Pikin' off for a joy ride all by their three-somes!"

"I suppose Captain Killam has found where his treasure island is," says Vee, "and is going to put it on exhibition. You know, he was out by himself ever so long to-day."

"He ought to be able to pick out something likely from among all of these," says I. "Islands is what this country seems to be long on. And they got a spiffy night for it, ain't they?"

"I think Auntie might have taken us along," says Vee, a bit pouty.

"We're no treasure hunters," I reminds her. "We're just to help out the pleasure-cruisin' bluff. Who there is to put it over on I don't quite catch, though. Ain't there any population in this part of the map?"

Vee thinks she can see a light 'way up the shore on Sanibel and another off towards the mainland; but the fact remains that here's a whole lot of perfectly good moonlight goin' to waste.

"If one of the iron steamboats could only wander down here with a Coney Island mob aboard," says I, "wouldn't they just eat this up? Think of 'em dancin' on the decks and—

Say, what's the matter with our startin' a little something like that?"

"Let's!" says Vee.

So we had a deck steward lug the music machine up out of the cabin, set J. Dudley to work puttin' on dance records, and, with Mrs. Mumford and the Professor and half the crew for a gallery, we gave an exhibition spiel for an hour or so. I hope they got as much fun out of it as we did. Anyway, it tapped the long, long ago for Mrs. Mumford. I heard her turnin' on the sob spigot for the Professor.

"Poor, dear Mr. Mumford!" she sighs. "How he did love dancing with me. And how wonderfully he could polka!"

"She's off again!" I whispers to Vee.

So we drifts forward as far away from this monologue about the dear departed as we could get. Not that we didn't appreciate hearin' intimate details about the late Mr. Mumford. We did—the first two or three times. After that it was more entertainin' to look at the moon.

For my part, I could have stood a few more hours of that; but about ten o'clock Mrs. Mumford's voice gives out, or she gets to the end of a chapter. Anyway, she informs us cheerful that it's time young folks was gettin' in their beauty sleep; so Vee goes off to her stateroom,

and after I've helped J. Dudley Simms burn up a couple of his special cork-tipped Russians, I turns in myself.

Didn't seem like I'd been poundin' my ear more'n half an hour, and I was dreamin' something lovely about doin' one of them pelican dives off a pink cotton cloud, when I feels someone shakin' me by the shoulder. I pries my eyes open, and finds one of the crew standin' over me, urgin' me to get up.

"Wrong number, Jack," says I. "I ain't on the night shift."

"It's the young lady, sir," says he. "You're to dress and come on deck."

"Eh?" says I. "Have we been U-boated or Zepped? All right; I'll be there in two minutes."

And I finds Vee costumed businesslike in a middy blouse and khaki skirt, stowin' things away in a picnic hamper.

"What's the plot of the piece?" I asks, yawny.

"Auntie and Mr. Ellins haven't come back yet," says she. "It's after three o'clock. Something must have happened."

"But Captain Killam is with 'em," says I.

"What use is he, I'd like to know? Torchy, we must go and find them."

"But I don't know any more about runnin'

a motor-boat than I do about playin' a trombone," I protests.

"I do," says Vee. "I learned in Bermuda one winter. I have coffee and sandwiches here. They'll be hungry."

"Better put in some cigars for Mr. Ellins," says I. "If he's run out of smokes I'd rather not find him."

"Get cigars, then," says she. "I have the small launch all ready."

"How about taking one of the crew?" I suggests.

"Bother!" says Vee. "Besides, they've seen sharks and are all frightened. I'm not afraid of sharks."

You bet she wasn't; nor of being out at night, nor of startin' a strange engine. You should have seen her spin that wheel and juggle the tiller ropes. Some girl!

"Got any clew as to where they are?" I asks.

"Only the general direction they took," says she. "But something must be done. Think of Auntie being out at this hour! When we get past those little islands we'll begin blowing the horn."

It was sort of weird, take it from me, moseyin' off that way at night into a tangle of islands without any signs up to tell you which way you was goin', or anybody in sight to ask

directions of. The moon was still doin' business, but it was droppin' lower every minute. Vee just stands there calm, though, rollin' the wheel scientific, pickin' out the deep water by the difference in color, and lettin' the *Agnes* fade away behind us as careless as if we had a return ticket.

"Excuse me for remarkin'," says I; "but, while I wouldn't be strong for this sort of excursion as a general thing, with just you and me on the passenger list I don't care if—"

"Blow the horn," cuts in Vee.

Yep, I blew. Over miles and miles of glassy water I blew it, listenin' every now and then for an answer. All I raised, though, was a bird squawk or so; and once we scared up a flock of white herons that sailed off like so many ghosts. Another time some big black things rolled out of the way almost alongside.

"What's them—whales?" I gasps.

"Porpoises," says Vee. "Keep on blowing."

"I'll be qualified as captain of a fish wagon before I'm through," says I. "Looks like that explorin' trio had gone and lost themselves for fair, don't it?"

"They must be somewhere among these islands," says Vee. "They couldn't have gone out on the Gulf, could they?"

We asked each other a lot of questions that

neither one of us knew the answer to. It sort of helped pass the time. And we certainly did do a thorough job of paging, for we cruised in and out of every little cove, and around every point we came to; and I kept the horn goin' until I was as shy on breath as a fat lady comin' out of the subway.

It was while I was restin' a bit that I got to explorin' one of the boat lockers, and dug up this Roman-candle affair that Vee said I might touch off. And it hadn't burned half way down before I spots an answerin' glow 'way off to the left.

"We've raised someone, anyway," says I.

"We'll know who it is soon," says Vee, turnin' the wheel.

Five minutes later and we got a reply to our horn—four long blasts.

"That means distress," says Vee. "Answer with three short ones."

A mile or so further on, as we swings wide around the end of an island where a shoal sticks out, we comes in sight of this big motor-boat lyin' quiet a couple of hundred feet off-shore with three people in it.

"There they are, thank goodness!" says Vee, shuttin' off the engine and lettin' the boat drift in towards 'em slow.

"Hello, there!" I calls out.

"That you, Torchy?" asks Old Hickory, anxious.

"Yep!" says I. "Me and Vee."

"Bully for you youngsters!" says he. "I might have known it would be you two who would find us."

"Verona, I am astonished," gasps Auntie.

"Yes, I thought you would be," says Vee. "What's the matter?"

"Matter!" snaps Auntie. "We're stuck in the mud, and have been for hours. Look out or you'll run aground, too."

But our boat wasn't half the size of theirs, and by polin' careful we got alongside.

My first move is to reach a handful of cigars to the boss.

"Heaven be praised!" says he, lightin' one up eager.

Meanwhile Vee is pourin' out some hot coffee from the picnic bottles. That and the sandwiches seemed to sort of soothe things all around, and we got a sketch of their troubles.

Just as Vee had suspected, Rupert had started out to show 'em the island where the treasure was. Oh, he was sure he could take 'em right to it.

"And we went blithering and blundering around for half the night," says Old Hickory, "until this marvel of marine intelligence ran

us hard and fast aground here, where we've been ever since."

"I—I got turned around," protests Rupert.

"We admit that," says Old Hickory. "I will even concede that you are swivel-brained and couldn't help it. But that fails to explain why you should invent for our benefit any such colossal whopper as that treasure-island fiction."

"No fiction about it," grumbles Rupert, his voice a bit husky, either from indignation or chicken sandwich, we couldn't tell which. "And I'll find it yet," he adds.

"You will have ample opportunity," says Old Hickory, "for when we leave here you will be left also. You may make a life job of it, if you wish."

"We ought to be getting back," says Auntie. "Will that little boat hold us all?"

"Why, this one is afloat now," announces Vee. "The tide must have come in."

"And here we've been sitting, like so many cabbage heads on a bench, waiting for someone to come and tell us about it!" snorts Old Hickory. "Excellent! Killam, do you think you can pilot us back without trying to cut new channels through the State of Florida?"

Rupert don't make any promises, but he gets busy; and pretty soon we're under way.

It's about them that I springs this hunch of mine.

"Say, Mr. Ellins," says I, "was this island you were lookin' for a little one with a hump in the middle?"

"That tallies with Captain Killam's description," says he. "Why?"

"Well," I goes on, "a little while before we located you we passed one like that. Don't you remember, Vee?"

"That's so," says Vee; "we did. I know right where it is, too."

"We might take a glance at it," says Old Hickory. "Killam, give Miss Verona the wheel."

I couldn't have said exactly which way to go, but Vee never hesitates a second. She steers straight back on the course we'd come, and inside of fifteen minutes we shoots past a point and opens up a whole clump of islands, with one tiny one tucked away in the middle.

"That's it!" shouts Rupert, jumpin' up and down. "That's Nunca Secos Key!"

"Maybe," says Old Hickory. "There does seem to be something of an elevation in the center. Let's run in as close as we can, Verona."

By this time we were all grouped in the bow, stretchin' our necks and gazin' interested.

"The mound!" suddenly sings out Rupert, pointin' excited. "The treasure mound! I told you I'd find it."

"Huh!" says Old Hickory. "You forgot to mention, however, that you would need Miss Verona and Torchy to do the finding for you."

Well, no need goin' into details, but that's how Vee and me happened to get counted in as reg'lar treasure hunters, to share and share alike. We was elected right on the spot."

"And now," says Old Hickory, grabbin' up a spade from the bottom of the boat, "now we—"

"Now we will go back to the yacht and get some sleep," announces Auntie. "I've had treasure hunting enough for one night. So have you, Matthew Ellins, if you only knew it."

Old Hickory shrugs his shoulders. He drops the spade. Then he lets go of a yawn.

"Oh, well!" says he. "If that's the way you feel about it."

"What!" says Vee. "Go another whole day without knowing whether—"

"Certainly," cuts in Auntie. "I'm so sleepy I couldn't tell a doubloon from a doughnut. Ho-ho-hum! Let's be getting back."

It wasn't much after six when we made the yacht, but the whole crew seems to be up and stirrin' around. As we comes alongside they sort of groups themselves into a gawp com-

mittee forward, and I caught them passin' the smile and nudge to each other. The two sailors that mans the landin' stairs are on the broad grin. It's well for them that neither Auntie nor Old Hickory seems to notice. I did, though, and trails behind the others gettin' out.

"What's all the comedy for?" I demands.

"Nothing at all, sir," says one.

Then the other breaks in with, "Any luck, sir?"

"Sure!" says I. "We saw a swell sunrise."

I'm wonderin', though, why all them hired hands should be givin' us the merry face.

CHAPTER XV

PASSING THE JOKE BUCK

I DON'T mind admittin' that this treasure-huntin' stuff does get you. Course, while I was only an outsider, with no ticket even for a brokerage bite at the gate receipts, I wasn't runnin' any temperature over the prospects.

But now it was different. Vee and I had gone out and shown this poor prune of a Captain Killam where his bloomin' island was, we'd rescued Auntie and Old Hickory from bein' stuck in the mud, and we'd been officially counted in as possible prize winners. More'n that, we'd seen the treasure mound.

"Torchy," says Vee, the first chance we has for a few side remarks after lunch that day, "what do you think? Is it full of gold and jewels?"

"Well," says I, tryin' to look wise, "it might be, mightn't it? And then again you can't always tell."

"But suppose it is?" insists Vee, her gray eyes bigger than ever.

"I can't," says I. "It's too much of a

strain. Honest, from what I've seen of the country down here, it would be a miracle to run across a single loose dollar, while as for uncoverin' it in bunches— Say, Vee, how much of this pirate guff do you stand for, anyway?"

"Why, you silly," says she. "Of course there were pirates—Lafitte and José Gaspar and—and a lot of others. They robbed ships right off here and naturally they buried their treasure when they came ashore."

"What simps!" says I. "Then they went off and forgot, eh?"

"Some were caught and hanged," says she, "and I suppose some were killed fighting. No one can tell. It was all so long ago, you see. They're all gone. But the islands are still here, aren't they?"

"I don't miss any," says I. "There's the mound, too. It's big enough to hold forty truckloads."

"Oh, there won't be that much," says she. "A few chests, perhaps. But think, Torchy, of digging up gold that has been lying there for a hundred years or more!"

"I don't care how old it is," says I, "if it's the kind you can shove in at the receivin' teller and get credit for. What you plannin' to blow your share against?"

"I hadn't thought much about that," says

Vee. "Only that I once saw the loveliest girdle made of old coins."

Isn't that the girl of it!

"You're a wonder, Vee," says I. "Here you stand to have a bundle of easy money wished on you, and all you can think of is winnin' a fancy belt."

Vee giggles good-natured.

"Well, Mister Solomon, what would you do with yours?"

"Swap it for as many blocks of Corrugated preferred as my broker could collect," says I. "Then when we declared an extra dividend—"

"Pooh!" says Vee. "You and Auntie are just alike."

"Wouldn't it cheer Auntie up a lot to hear that?" says I. "I expect she's busy spendin' her share, too."

"I should say," announces Vee, "that we had all better be planning how to get that treasure on board the yacht. Captain Killam says we mustn't go there by day, you know, because someone might follow us. Then there's the crew. I wonder if they suspect anything?"

Come to find out, that was what we was all wonderin'. Course, Rupert would be the first to develop a case of nerves. He reports that he's come across groups of 'em whisperin' mysterious. Which reminds Auntie that she'd

noticed something of the kind, too. Even Mr. Ellins admits that some of the men had acted sort of queer. And right while we're holdin' our confab someone looks around and discovers that a sailor has drifted up sleuthy almost within earshot.

"Hey, you!" calls out Old Hickory. "What are you doing there?"

"Just touching up the brasswork, sir," says he.

"Do your touching up some other time," orders Old Hickory. "Forward with you!"

"Yes, sir," says the party in the white jumper, and sneaks off.

"Listening!" says Rupert. "That's what he was doing."

"Who knows what they may be plotting," says Auntie, "or what sort of men they are? Sailors are apt to be such desperate characters. Why, we might all be murdered in our beds!"

"As likely as not," says Rupert gloomy.

And you know how catchin' an idea like that is. Up to then we hadn't taken much notice of the crew, no more'n you do of the help anywhere. Oh, we'd got so we could tell the deck stewards apart. One was a squint-eyed little Cockney that misplaced his aitches, but was always on hand when you wanted anything. Another was a tall, lanky Swede who was

always "Yust coomin', sir." Then there was the bristly-haired Hungarian we called Goulash. They'd all seemed harmless enough before; but now we took to sizin' 'em up close. At dinner, when they was servin' things, I glanced around and found all four of our treasure-huntin' bunch followin' every move made. The usual table chatter had stopped, too.

"Why!" says Mrs. Mumford, springin' that silly laugh of hers, "it must be twenty minutes of."

Nobody says a word, for Ole and Goulash was servin' the fish course. You could see they was fussed, too. It was a queer sort of dinner-party. I could tell by the look of Old Hickory's eyes that something was coming from him. And sure enough, after coffee had been passed, he proceeds to tackle the situation square and solid, like he always does. He waves off the stewards and sends for Lennon, the yacht captain.

One of these chunky, square-jawed gents, Captain Lennon is, and about as sociable as a traffic cop on duty. His job is runnin' the yacht, and he sticks to it.

"Captain," says Mr. Ellins, "I want to know something about your crew. What are they like, now?"

The Cap looks sort of puzzled.

"Why, they're all right, I guess," says he.

"Please don't guess," cuts in Auntie. "Are they all good, responsible, steady-going trustworthy men, on whose character you can absolutely depend?"

"I couldn't say, madam," says he. "We don't get 'em from divinity schools."

"Of course not," chimes in Old Hickory. "What we really want to know is this: Do your men suspect what we are here for?"

The Captain nods.

"How much do they know—er—about the buried treasure, for instance?" demands Old Hickory.

Captain Lennon shrugs his shoulders.

"About twice as much as is so, I suppose," says he. "They're great gossips, sailors—worse than so many old women."

"Huh!" grunts Mr. Ellins. "And about how long have they known all this?"

"I overheard some of them talking about it before we sailed," says the Captain. "There were those new shovels and picks, you know; perhaps those set them guessing. Anyway, they were passing the word from the first."

Mr. Ellins shakes his head and glances at Killam. Auntie presses her lips tight and stares from one to the other.

"This is serious," says Old Hickory. "Why didn't you tell us of this before?"

"Why," says Captain Lennon, "I didn't think you'd like it, sir. And I've warned the men."

"Warned them against what?" asks Old Hickory.

"Against showing their grins above decks," says the Captain. "Of course, I can't stop their having their jokes in their own quarters."

"Jokes?" echoes Mr. Ellins.

"Jokes!" gasps Auntie.

Captain Lennon hunches his shoulders again.

"I thought you wouldn't like it, sir," says he; "but that's the way they look at it. I've told them it was none of their business what you folks did; that you could afford to hunt for buried treasure, or buried beans, or buried anything else, if you wanted to. And if you'll report one of them even winking disrespectful, or showing the trace of a grin, I'll set him and his ditty bag ashore so quick—"

"Thank you, Captain," breaks in Mr. Ellins, kind of choky; "that—that will be all."

You should have seen the different expressions around that table after the Captain has gone. I don't know that I ever saw Old Hickory actually look sheepish before. As for Auntie, she's almost ready to blow a fuse.

"Well," says she explosive. "I like that! Jokes, are we?"

"So it appears," says Mr. Ellins. "At any rate, we seem to be in no danger from a mutinous crew. Our little enterprise merely amuses them."

"Pooh!" says Auntie. "Ignorant sailors! What do they know about—"

But just then there booms in through the portholes this hearty hail from outside:

"Ahoy the *Agnes!* Who's aboard there? Wha-a-a-at! Mr. Ellins, of New York. Well, well! Hey, you! Fend off there. I'm coming in."

"Megrue!" says Old Hickory. "If it isn't I'll—"

It was, all right: Bernard J. Megrue, one of our biggest Western customers, president of a couple of railroads, and director in a lot of companies that's more or less close to the Corrugated Trust. He's a husk, Barney Megrue is —big and breezy, with crisp iron-gray hair, lively black eyes, and all the gentle ways of a section boss.

He's got up in a complete khaki rig, includin' shirt and hat to match, and below the eyebrows he has a complexion like a mahogany sideboard. It don't take him long to make himself right to home among us.

"Well, well!" says he, workin' a forced draught on one of Old Hickory's choice cassa-

doras. "Who'd ever think of running across you down here? After tarpon, eh? That's me, too. Hung up my third fish for the season only yesterday; a beauty, too—hundred and sixty-three pounds—and it took me just two hours and forty-five minutes to make the kill. But say, Ellins, this is no stand for real strikes. Now, you move up to Boca Grande to-morrow and I'll show you fishing that's something like."

"Thanks, Barney," says Old Hickory, "but I'm no whaler. In fact, I'm no fisherman at all."

"Oh, I see," says Megrue. "Just cruising, eh? Well, that's all right if you like it. People come to Florida for all sorts of things. Which reminds me of something rich. Heard it from my boatman. He tells me there's a party of New York folks down here hunting for pirate gold. Haw, haw! How about that, eh?"

Embarrassin' pause. Very. Nobody dared look at anybody else. At least, I didn't. I was waverin' between a gasp and a snicker, and was nearly chokin' over it, when Old Hickory clears his throat raspy and menacin'.

"Well, what about it?" he asks snappy.

"Why," says Megrue, "it seems too good to be true, that's all. As I told the boys up at the hotel, if there are any real treasure-hunting

bugs around, I want to get a good look at 'em—especially if they're from New York. That's one on you, eh, Ellins? Proves you have a few folks in the big town who have bats in their belfries, don't it?"

That gets an uneasy squirm out of Old Hickory, but he comes right back at him.

"Just why?" he demands.

"Why, great Scott, Ellins," goes on Megrue enthusiastic, "don't you know that buried treasure stuff is the stalest kind of tourist bait in use on the whole Florida coast? The hotel people have been handing that out for the past fifty years. Wouldn't think anyone could be still found who'd bite at it, would you? But it seems they exist. Every once in a while a new lot of come-ons show up, with their old charts and their nice new shovels, and go to digging. Why, I was shown a place just north of Little Gasparilla—Cotton River, they call it—where the banks have been dug up for miles by these simple-minded nuts.

"Every now and then, too, they circulate that musty tale about an old Spaniard, in Tampa or Fort Myers or somewhere, who whispers deathbed directions about finding a chest of gold buried at the foot of a lone palmetto on some key or other. And say, they tell me there isn't a lone tree on this section

of the coast that hasn't been dug up by the roots. Good old human nature can't be downed, can it? You can suppress the green-goods and gold-brick games, but folks will still go to shoveling sand if you mention pirates to 'em. What I want is to see 'em at it once."

The harder you jolt Old Hickory, though, the steadier he gets.

"Huh!" says he, smilin' sarcastic. "An ambition such as yours ought to be gratified. Take a good look at us, Megrue."

"Wha-a-a-at!" gasps Barney, starin' at him. "You—you don't mean that—that—"

"Precisely," says Old Hickory. "We are the crack-brained New Yorkers you are so anxious to see."

Well, when he recovers his breath he does his best to square himself. He apologizes four different ways, gettin' in deeper with every turn, until finally he edges towards the stairs and makes his escape.

"At least," remarks Old Hickory, "I suppose it is something to provide a source of innocent merriment. I trust we are not overlooking anyone who might wish to be amused."

Before the evenin' was over he had his answer. About eight-thirty out comes a fast motor-boat and ties up alongside without askin' leave. Reporters, two of 'em. They climbs up,

grinnin' and amiable, specially the fat one in the tight-fittin' Palm Beach suit. They wanted to know when we was goin' to start diggin', and if we'd mind their bringin' out a movie machine, so one of 'em could get a few hundred feet of film for a picture news service that he represented.

"It ought to be great stuff," says Fatty.

"Young man," says Old Hickory, breathin' hard and talkin' through his teeth, "have you any idea what a splash you'd make if you were dropped overboard?"

"Oh, come, guv'nor," protests Fatty; "we only want to—"

About then, though, he decides to make a scramble for his boat and the interview was off. Old Hickory stands glarin' after the pair until they're out of sight. Then he chuckles unpleasant.

"For a private, not to say secret, enterprise," says he, "it occurs to me that ours is rather well advertised. What next, I wonder?"

"There's a big boat headed this way on the other side," says I. "Seems to me I hear a band, too."

"Excursionists!" says Auntie. "Do you suppose they would have the impudence?"

"Looks like a moonlight round trip, with the

Agnes as the object of interest," says I. "Yep! They've got the searchlight on us."

"This is insufferable!" says Auntie, and beats it below, to lock herself in her stateroom.

"Gr-r-r-r!" remarks Old Hickory, and follows suit.

We never did trace out who had done such thorough press work for us; but I have my suspicions it was the chief steward, who went ashore reg'lar every morning after milk and cream. But the round-trippers surely was well posted. We could hear 'em talkin' us over, shoutin' their comments above the rumble of the engine.

Vee and I didn't want to miss any of it, so we hikes up on the bridge and camps behind the canvas spray shield. Captain Lennon come up, too, sort of standin' guard. It was 'most like bein' under fire in the trenches.

"That's her—the *Agnes* of New York!" we heard 'em sing out. "My, what a perfectly swell yacht, Minnie! Ain't they the boobs, though? Hey, Sam, why dontcher ask them squirrels can they make a noise like a nut? Huntin' pirate gold, are they? Who's been kiddin' 'em that way?"

"Little sample of Southern hospitality, I expect," says I. "All they lack is a few ripe eggs and some garden confetti."

"I wonder if Auntie can hear?" giggles Vee. "Do you know what this makes me feel like? As if I were a person in a cartoon."

"You've said it," says I. "What I mind most, though, is that fresh gink with the searchlight. Say, Cap'n, why couldn't we turn ours loose at him as a come-back?"

"Go ahead," says Captain Lennon, throwin' a switch.

Say, that was a great little thought, for the *Agnes* has a high-powered glim, and when I swung it onto that excursion boat it made theirs look like a boardin'-house gas jet with the pressure low. You could see the folks blinkin' and battin' their eyes as if they was half blinded. Next I picks up the pilot house and gives the man at the wheel the full benefit.

"Hey! Take off that light," he sings out. "I can't see where I'm runnin'. Take it off!"

"Switch off yours, then, you mutt," says I, "and run your cheap sandwich gang back where they belong under the hominy vines."

My, don't that raise a howl, though! They wanted to mob us for keeps then, and all sorts of junk begun to fly through the air. Then Cap'n Lennon took a hand.

"Sheer off there!" he orders, "or I'll turn the fire hose on you."

Well, the excursion captain stayed long

enough to pass the time of day, but when he saw the sailors unreelin' the hose he got a move on; and in half an hour we was lyin' quiet again in the moonlight.

Must have been well on towards midnight, and I was just ready to turn in when Mr. Ellins comes paddin' out of his stateroom, luggin' two pairs of hip rubber boots.

"Torchy," says he, "call Killam, will you?"

By the time I'd routed out Rupert, I finds Auntie and Vee waitin' in the main cabin, all dressed for travel.

"I may be the oldest joke on record," says Old Hickory, "but I propose to know before morning what is in that mound. Of course, if anyone feels foolish about going—"

"I do, for one," speaks up Auntie, "and I should think you would, too, Matthew Ellins. We've been told how silly we are enough times to-night, haven't we?"

"We have," says Old Hickory. "Which is just why I propose to see this thing through."

"And I am quite as stubborn as you are," says Auntie. "That is why I am going, too."

Vee and I didn't put up any apologies. We just trailed along silent. As for Rupert, he'd been kicked around so much the last few days that he hadn't a word to say. Here he was, too, right on the verge of the big test that he'd been

workin' up to so long, and he's so meek he hardly dares open his head. When we starts pilin' into the launch he shows up with a couple of bundles.

"What the syncopated seraphims have you there?" demands Old Hickory.

"Gas bombs," says Rupert. "To clear out the snakes."

"Careful with 'em," growls Old Hickory. "What else?"

"A few canvas bags for—for the treasure, sir," says Rupert, duckin' his head sheepish. "Shall—shall I put them in?"

"Oh, you might as well," says Old Hickory.

And once more, with Vee at the wheel, we sneaks off in the moonlight for Nunca Secos Key. We wasn't a chatty lot of adventurers. I expect we all felt like we was about to open an April fool package, and wished the others hadn't been there to watch. None of us could pass anyone else the laugh; that was some satisfaction.

There was enough outsiders, though, to give us the titter. Megrue was sure to spread the tale among Old Hickory's business friends. And who knew what that pair of foiled interviewers would do to us? Some of their stuff might get into the New York papers. Then wouldn't Mr. Ellins be let in for a choice lot of

joshin'! No wonder he sits chewin' savage at a cold cigar.

When we gets near the little island, though, he rouses up. He pulls on a pair of wadin' boots and tosses another pair to me. Rupert, he's all fixed up for rough work, and even Vee has brought some high huntin' shoes.

So, when we lands, each takes a shiny new spade or a pick and makes ready to explore the mound that looms mysterious through the mangrove bushes. First off, Rupert has to toss out a couple of gas bombs, in case there might be rattlers roamin' around. And, believe me, any snake that could stand that smell was entitled to stay on the ground. It's ten or fifteen minutes before we dared go near ourselves. Rupert suggests that we start a tunnel in from the bottom, and sort of relay each other as our wind gives out.

"Very well," says Old Hickory. "It's a good many years since I did any excavating, but I think I can still swing a pick."

Say, he could; that is, for a five-minute stretch. And while he's restin' up I tackles it. I didn't last so long, either. Rupert, though, comes out strong. He makes the sand fly at a great rate. Vee stands by, holdin' an electric torch, while Auntie watches from the boat.

"We're makin' quite a hole in it, Mr. Ellins," says I, sort of encouragin'.

"It is the usual thing to do, I believe," says he, "before owning up that you've been fooled. Here, Killam, let me have another go at that."

He don't do it because he's excited about it, but just because it's his turn. In fact, we'd all got to about that stage. We'd shoveled out a wagon load or two of old roots and sand and rotten shells without uncoverin' so much as a rusty nail, and it looked like we might keep on until mornin' with the same amazin' success. Considerin' that we was half beaten before we started, we'd done a pretty fair job. It was just a question now of how soon somebody'd have nerve enough to make a motion that we quit. That's when we had our first little flutter.

"Huh!" says Old Hickory, jabbin' in with his spade. "Must have struck a log. Hand me a pick, someone."

When he makes a swing with that, the point goes in solid and sticks.

"Right! It is a log," he announces.

Killam tests it, and he says it's a log, too.

"An old palmetto trunk," says he, proddin' at it. "Two of them, one laid on the other. No, three. I say, that's funny. Let's clear away all of this stuff."

So we goes at it, all three at once, and inside of fifteen minutes we can see what looks like the side of a little log cabin.

"If this was out in Wisconsin," says Old Hickory, "I should say we'd found somebody's root cellar. But who would build such a thing in Florida?"

"Come on," says Killam, his voice sort of shrill and quivery. "I have one of the logs loose. Now pry here with your picks, everybody. Together, now! It's coming! Once more! There! Now the next one above. Oh, put your weight on it, Mr. Ellins. Get a fresh hold. Try her now. It's giving! Again. Harder. Look out for your toes! And let's have that light here, Miss Verona. Flash it into this hole. Isn't that a—a—"

"It's a barrel," says Vee.

"Water butt," says Killam. "An old ship's water butt. There are the staves of another, fallen apart. And look! Will—you—look, all of you!"

Would we? Say, we was crowded around that black hole in the mound as thick as noon lunchers at a pie counter. And we was strainin' our eyes to see what the faint light of the torch was tryin' to show up. All of a sudden I reaches in and makes a grab at something, bringin' out a fistful.

"Hard money," says I, "or I don't know the feel!"

"Why, it—it's gold!" says Vee, bringin' her flashlight close.

"There's more of it, a lot more!" shouts Killam, who has his head and shoulders inside and is pawin' around excited. "Quarts and quarts of it! And jewels, too! I say, Mr. Ellins! Jewels! Didn't I tell you we'd find 'em? See, here they are. See those! And those! Didn't I say so?"

"You did, Captain," admits Old Hickory. "You certainly did. And for a time I was just ass enough to believe you, wasn't I?"

"Oh, Auntie!" calls Vee. "We've found it! Honest to goodness we have. Come and see."

"As though I wasn't coming as fast as I could, child!" says Auntie, who has scrambled over the bow somehow and is plowin' towards us with her skirts gripped high on either side.

Thrillin'! Say, I don't believe any of us could tell just what we did do for the next half hour or so. I remember once Old Hickory got jammed into the hole and we had to pry him out. And another time, when we was rollin' out the cask, it was Auntie who helped me pull it through and ease it down the slope. She'd lost most of her hairpins and her gray hair was hangin' down her back. Also, she'd stepped

on the front of her skirt and ripped off a breadth. But them trifles didn't seem to bother her a bit.

"Ho, ho!" she warbles merry. "Gold and jewels! The jewels of old Spain and of the days of Louis Fourteenth. Pirate gold! We've dug it! The very thing I've always wanted to do ever since I was a little girl. Ho, ho!"

"And I rather guess," adds Old Hickory, fishin' a broken cigar out of his vest pocket, "that as treasure hunters we're not such thundering jokes, after all. Eh?"

And say, when Old Hickory starts crowin' you can know he sees clear through to daylight. I looks over my shoulder just then, and, sure enough, it's beginnin' to pink up in the east.

"My dope is," says I, "that it's goin' to be a large, wide day. Anyhow, it opens well."

CHAPTER XVI

TORCHY TAKES A RUNNING JUMP

Course, it don't sound natural. A merry sunrise party is an event that ain't often listed on the cards, unless it's a continuous session from the evenin' before. But this wasn't a case of a bunch of night-bloomin' gladiolas who'd lasted through. Hardly. Although Auntie does have something of a look like the parties you see lined up at Yorkville Court, charged with havin' been rude to taxi drivers; and Mr. Ellins might have been passin' the night on a bakery gratin' with a sportin' extra for a blanket.

We was a long, long ways from either taxis or traffic cops, though. We was on Nunca Secos Key, with the Gulf of Mexico murmurin' gentle behind us, and out in front a big red sun was blazin' through the black pines that edge the west coast of Florida. Five of us, includin' Vee and Captain Rupert Killam and me; and each in our own peculiar way was registerin' the Pollyanna-Mrs. Wiggs stuff.

Why not? For one thing, it's about as handsome a December mornin' as you could dream

of—the air soft and mild, with a clean, salty smell to it that sort of gives you a romantic hunch every sniff you pump in.

But the big reason for this early-mornin' joyfest of ours— Well, there's the pirate treasure, almost enough to load a pushcart with. You know how you feel when you pluck a stray quarter from the L stairs, or maybe retrieve a dollar bill that's been playin' hide-and-seek in the gutter? Multiply that by the thrill you'd get if you'd had your salary raised and been offered par for a block of industrials that had been wished on you at ten a share, all in the same day. Then you'll have a vague idea of how chirky we was at 5:30 A.M. as we stood around in front of that mound we'd torn open, gawpin' first at the heap of loot and then at each other.

Simple way to pass the time, eh? But, somehow, we couldn't seem to take it in that we'd actually done the trick. I know I couldn't. I've always kidded myself along, too, that I was something of a speed artist when it came to framin' up a situation. I expect we all hand ourselves little floral offerin's like that. But when we get up against anything really new—that is, some sensation we ain't happened to meet before—we find we ain't such hair-trigger propositions, after all. We catches ourselves

doin' the open-face act, while the little stranger idea stands tappin' patient on the wood.

Course, treasure huntin' was just what had lured us so far from home. For nearly three weeks, now, that had been the big notion. But cruisin' around in a yacht lookin' for pirate gold as sort of a freaky lark is one thing, while actually diggin' it out and seein' it heaped before you on the sand is another.

Maybe Captain Killam was expectin' to carry the game this far. He's just cocky enough for that. But it's plain to see that Auntie and Mr. Ellins had been playin' a long shot just for the sport of holdin' a ticket and watchin' the wheel turn. As for me and Vee, we'd pooh-poohed the idea consistent from the very start, and had only been let in along towards the last because we'd happened to be useful. I don't know that we was any more staggered, though, than the rest of 'em. One sure sign that Old Hickory and Auntie was excited was the fact that they'd begun callin' each other by their given names.

"Cornelia," says he, "we've done it. We have achieved adventure."

"In spite of our gray hairs—eh, Matthew?" says she.

"In spite of everything," says Old Hickory. "True, we haven't been shipwrecked, or en-

dured hardship, or spilled any gore. But we have outfaced a lot of ridicule. If the whiskered old sinners who hid away this stuff had met as much they might have given up piracy in disgust. Who knows?"

With that Mr. Ellins snips the end from a fat black cigar, jams his hands in his pockets, and spreads his feet wide apart. He's costumed in a flannel outing shirt open at the neck, and a pair of khaki trousers stuffed into hip rubber boots with the tops turned down. Also his grizzly hair is tousled and his face is well smeared up with soot or something. Honest, if he'd had a patch over one eye and gold rings in his ears he could have qualified as a bold, bad buccaneer himself. Only there's an amiable cut-up twinkle under them shaggy brows of his, such as I'd never seen there before.

"Killam," says he, "why don't you chortle?"

"I—I beg pardon?" says Rupert.

He's sittin' on a log, busy rollin' a cigarette, and in place of his usual solemn air he looks satisfied and happy. That's as much as he can seem to loosen up.

"Great pickled persimmons, man!" snorts Old Hickory. "Let's be human. Come, we're all tickled to death, aren't we? Let's make a noise about it, then. Torchy, can't you start something appropriate?"

"Sure!" says I. "How about doin' a war dance? Yuh-huh! Yuh-huh! Get in step, Vee. Now we're off. Yuh-huh! Yuh-huh!"

"Fine!" says Old Hickory, droppin' in behind Vee and roarin' out the Sagawa patter like a steam siren. "Yuh-huh! Yuh-huh! Come, Captain. Fall in, Cornelia. Yuh-huh! Yuh-huh!"

Would you believe it? Well, Auntie does. I never thought it was in the old girl. But say, there she is, her gray hair streamin' down over her shoulders, her skirts grabbed up on either side, and lettin' out the yelps easy and joyous. Even Rupert has to grin and join in.

Round and round that treasure heap we prances, like so many East Side kids 'round a Maypole in Central Park, with the yuh-huhs comin' faster and louder, until finally Auntie slumps on the sand and uncorks the only real genuine laugh I've ever known her to be guilty of. No wonder Vee stops and rushes over to her.

"Why, Auntie!" says Vee. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" says Auntie, breathin' hard and chucklin' in between. "Why, my dear child, I haven't done anything so absurd as this since —since I was forty, and—and it has done me a world of good, I'm sure."

What do you know about that? Admits she carried on as late as forty! And here I'd supposed she was born scowlin' about the time tabasco sauce was invented. Well, once more I got to revise my ideas about her. Maybe she ain't any frostier underneath than the rest of us.

"Allow me, Cornelia, to present you with the palm," says Mr. Ellins, handin' her a palmetto leaf. "As a war dancer you betray evidence of previous proficiency. Doesn't she, Torchy?"

"I'll bet she could have had Mrs. Sittin' Bull crowded into the back drop," says I grinnin'.

And Auntie returns the grin.

You might know it would be Rupert who'd break the spell.

"I am wondering," says he, "just how we are going to get all this treasure on board the yacht without the crew knowing all about it."

"Why wonder?" says Old Hickory. "Leave it to Torchy."

"Ah, say!" I protests.

"No alibis," insists Mr. Ellins, slappin' me encouragin' on the shoulder. " Strategy is what we want from you, young man. Plenty of it under that brilliant hair of yours. We'll give you three minutes."

And of course, havin' it batted up to me that

way by the big boss, and with Vee gazin' at me expectant, I had to produce.

"You'll stand for any little tale I tell 'em, eh?" I asks.

"Absolutely," says he.

So we gets to work with the dozen or more canvas sacks that Rupert has been foxy enough to bring along. In the bottom we puts a shovelful of sand; then we dumps in the gold pieces and jewels promiscuous, with more sand on top, not fillin' any sack more'n a third full. That made 'em easy to handle, and when they was tossed into the launch there was no suspicious jingle or anything like that.

Half an hour later we was chuggin' away from the little natural jackpot that we'd opened so successful, headed for the *Agnes*. And, believe me, the old yacht looks mighty homey and invitin', lyin' there in the calm of the mornin' with all her awnin's spread and a trickle of blue smoke driftin' up from the forward galley.

"Any orders?" asks Mr. Ellins, as we starts to run alongside.

"I got a few words to say to them early-bird sailors that's house-cleanin' the decks," says I. "I'm goin' to ask you to stay in the boat, Mr. Ellins, and look worried. The rest can go aboard. Captain Killam might rout

out the chef and get action on an early breakfast."

"Ay, ay, Captain Torchy," says Old Hickory. "Here we are, with a smiling reception committee to greet us, as usual."

There was five in the scrubbin' squad, includin' the second mate, a pie-faced Swede by the name of Nelse; and, while they seems mighty busy with pails and mops and brass polishers, I notice they all manages to drift over to our side of the yacht. You couldn't exactly accuse them of wearin' grins, but they did look as though something amusin' had occurred recent. Which shows we was still doin' duty as human jokes. But that's just what I makes my play on.

As soon as I can dash up the landin' steps, I beckons the second mate to follow me aft.

"Call your bunch back here, too," says I, "so there'll be no bonehead plays made."

Then, when I gets 'em together, I tips Nelse the knowin' wink.

"You ain't supposed to know a thing about what's been goin' on to-night, eh?" I asks.

Nelse, he shrugs his shoulders.

"Aye yust know about work," says he, lyin' free and easy.

"That's a swell motto to pin on the wall," says I. "But listen, Nelse, while I put a case to

you. Suppose, now, you'd been tipped off that if you dug under a certain bush in a certain back yard you'd find—well, something worth luggin' away? Ah, never mind shakin' your head! This is only supposin'. And we'll say the neighbors were wise; they'd watched you go out with your spade and lantern. And after you'd near broke your back diggin' you found you'd been buffaloed. Are you followin' me?''

Who says a Swede is all solid maple from the neck up? Nelse's buttermilk blue eyes flickers with almost human intelligence. Some of the men smother a snicker.

''Well,'' I goes on, ''we'll say you was sensitive about it. In order to duck their frivolous remarks when you came sneakin' back, maybe you'd be deceitful enough to bluff it through. You might lug something home in the bag, even if it was only some loose real estate. I don't say you would, mind you. You got such an honest, cash-register face. But there are shifty parties who could do that and never bat an eye. I ain't mentionin' any names.''

I didn't need to. To a man, they glances over the rail at Mr. Ellins.

''Then that's all,'' says I. ''Only you got to lay off with them merry expressions when you lug those sacks aboard. Handle 'em careful

and reverent, and stow 'em in the main cabin where you're told. If you do it well I expect there'll be more or less in it for all of you. Now, then, got your cues, have you?"

They salutes respectful.

"Then get busy with the stevedore stuff," says I.

And say, if they'd been coached by a stage manager they couldn't have done better. Course, I did catch 'em passin' the wink to each other as two of 'em marches across the deck holdin' a sack tender between 'em; but that was when they knew nobody but me could see. While they was down where Old Hickory had his eye on 'em, they was as solemn as pallbearers. But I'll bet it wasn't many minutes after they got to their own quarters before the hearty haw-haws was turned loose in four different languages.

Meanwhile Auntie and Mr. Ellins has been lookin' on without gettin' the plot of the piece.

"I must say," Auntie comes out with, "that I see no very subtle strategy about that performance. Those men must have suspected. What did they think they were carrying on board so carefully?"

"Sand," says I.

"Huh!" grunts Old Hickory.

"You said you'd stand for it," says I. "And

all you owe 'em is about two apiece for helpin' you save your face."

"My face, eh?" says Old Hickory.

"Someone had to be the goat," says I.

"Why, to be sure," cuts in Auntie, beamin' good-natured again. "And I think Torchy managed it very cleverly."

"Thanks, Mrs. Hemmingway," says I. "Maybe you'll do as much for me some time, eh?"

"Why—er—certainly I will," says Auntie, catchin' her breath a little.

I had just sense enough to let it ride at that, for you can't push a thing too far before breakfast. But I didn't mean to let this grand little idea of mine grow cold. It struck me that, if ever I was goin' to call for a show-down from Auntie, this was the day.

So, when I finally turned in for a forenoon nap, I was busier plottin' out just how it ought to be done than I was at makin' up lost sleep. I ain't one of them that can romp around all night, though, and then do the fretful toss on the hay for very long after I've hit the pillow. First thing I knew, I was pryin' my eyes open to find that it's almost 1:30 P.M., and with the sun beatin' straight down on the deck overhead I don't need to turn on any steam heat in the stateroom.

A good souse in a tubful of salty Gulf water wakes me up all over, and when I've dolled myself in a fresh Palm Beach suit and a soft collared shirt I'm feelin' like Winnin' Willie.

As it happens, Vee and I has the luncheon table to ourselves that day, neither Auntie nor Mr. Ellins havin' shown up, and the others bein' all through. And somehow Vee always does have that look of—well, as though she'd just blown in from the rose garden. You know, kind of clean and crisp and—and honeysuckley. Maybe it's that pinky-white complexion of hers, or the simple way she dresses. Anyway, she looks good enough to eat. Don't do to tell 'em so, though.

"Good morning, Torchy," says she, chirky and sweet.

"Wrong on two counts, young lady," says I, ticklin' her ear playful as I passes.

"Really?" says she, delayin' her attack on a grapefruit. "Just how?"

"It's afternoon, for one item," says I. "And say, why not ditch that juvenile hail? Torchy, Torchy! Seems to me I ought to be mistered to-day. Someone ought to do it, anyway."

"Why to-day any more than yesterday?" asks Vee.

I waits until the dinin'-room steward has

faded, and then I remarks haughty: "Maybe it ain't come to you that I'm a near-plute now."

"Pooh!" says Vee. "You're not a bit richer than I am."

"Boy, page the auditin' committee!" says I. "How strong do you tally up?"

"I'm sure I don't know," says she. "Neither do you, Mister Torchy."

"Oh, yes, I do," says I. "I've got just the same as you."

Vee runs out the tip of her tongue at me.

"That's the sort of disposition," says she, "which goes with red hair."

"Towhead yourself!" says I. "What kind of a scramble has the cook got on the eggs to-day?"

"You'd better order soft-boiled," says Vee. "I'll open them for you."

"Will you?" says I. "Just this once, or does that stand?"

"This—this is so abrupt!" says Vee, snickerin'.

"You tell it well," says I. "Just as though I hadn't been doin' my best to dodge the net! But what chance has a man got when he's cornered at breakfast and she offers to— Ouch!"

Vee springs one of them boardin'-school tricks of hers, shootin' a teaspoonful of water accurate across the table.

"Rough-houser!" says I, moppin' my eye with the napkin. "If your Auntie can't train you, maybe she'll let me try."

"Oh, no doubt she would," says Vee.

"I might ask her," I suggests.

"I'd love to be around when you did," says she, rollin' her eyes impish.

"Meanin' I wouldn't dare, eh?" says I.

Vee only dabbles her pink finger-ends in the little glass bowl, and chuckles like she was rememberin' something funny.

"Suppose I did and got away with it?" I asks.

Vee gives me a quizzin' glance from them gray eyes, one of the kind that sort of warms me up under my vest.

"I couldn't decorate you with the Victoria Cross," says she.

"But would you take a chance on the results?" I asks.

"One of the silly things I've learned from you," says Vee, lowerin' her eyelids fetchin', "is to—to take a chance."

"Vee!" says I, startin' to dash around the table.

"Hush!" says she, wavin' me back. "Here come your eggs."

Say, what went on durin' the rest of the day I couldn't tell. I expect it was a good deal the

same kind of an afternoon we'd been havin' right along, but to me it was three X double A with the band playin'. I was light in the head and I had springs in my heels. Everything and everybody looked good to me.

I jollied Old Hickory into lettin' me tip the sailors that had lugged the sacks aboard, and I threw in some of his best cigars just by way of relievin' my feelin's. Whenever I passed Captain Rupert Killam I hammered him on the back folksy and told him he sure was some discoverer. I even let Mrs. Mumford feed me an earful about how the late dear Mr. Mumford always remembered to send home a bunch of roses on their weddin' anniversary. Rather than revisit the scene himself, I suppose.

But when it come to playin' opposite Auntie —say, I was right there with the Percy-boy stuff: givin' her a hand up the stairs when she came on deck, leadin' her to a chair on the shady side, and hintin' how she looked mighty chipper after an all-night session such as we'd had. Talk about smooth stuff! I had the inside of a banana peel lookin' like a nutmeg grater.

Auntie falls for it, too. She has me whisper in her ear just where the treasure is stowed and how complete we'd thrown the crew off the trail. I works up that sketch of my talk

with the Swede second mate until I had her shoulders shakin'.

"What a boy you are!" says she, gaspy.

"Don't overlook the fact that I'll be votin' next year," says I.

"How absurd!" says Auntie.

"We do grow up, you know," says I. "It's a habit we have. And now, how about a glass of that iced pineapple the steward fixes so well? Sure! Lemme fetch a couple."

The climax was when she got me to holdin' a skein of yarn for her. As Old Hickory strolls by and sees me with my hands stuck out, I thought he was goin' to swallow his cigar.

Still, I couldn't get just the right cue. Not that I'd mapped out anything definite. I only knew I had something special and particular to say to Auntie, but I couldn't spring it unless I got the proper hunch. So the afternoon petered out, and the sun dropped into the Gulf, and folks begun disappearin' to dress for dinner.

The word had been passed that this was to be a special event to-night, so it's full white flannels for the men and evenin' gowns for the ladies. You see, we hadn't told the outsiders a word. In fact, they didn't even know we'd been away from the yacht durin' the night.

It's a swell feed the steward puts on, too,

considerin' where we was. Nothin' dry about it, either; for, while Mr. Ellins ain't a great hand to overdo irrigation, he's no guide to the Great Desert. There was silver ice buckets on the floor, and J. Dudley Simms lost a side bet to Professor Leonidas Barr on namin' the vintage. He was five years too young.

Not until coffee had been served did Old Hickory give any hint that this was to be a reg'lar celebration, with post-prandial doin's. Then he proceeds to chase out all the help, lockin' the doors behind 'em. Next he has me pull the shades over the cabin windows.

"Friends," says he, "you all know what it was that we came down here for. It sounded foolish in New York, I acknowledge. Even in these surroundings, our enterprise may have appealed to some of you as a bit fantastic. But —Torchy, will you and Captain Killam bring those sacks?"

Did we have 'em goggle-eyed? Say, when we dumped peck after peck of treasure and sand in the middle of the dinner table, and they got to pawin' over those weird old gold pieces and them samples of antique jewelry, it was a knockout for fair.

"My word!" gasps J. Dudley. "You must feel like successful bank robbers."

"Wonderful!" says Professor Barr, breath-

in' excited through his whiskers. "Why, some of these doubloons must have been coined during the reign of—"

"Cornelia," breaks in Mrs. Mumford, "will you look at that old brooch. It's exquisite!"

"Then it is yours as a souvenir of the trip," says Auntie—just like that.

Next, Dudley and the Professor was asked to pick out a trinket. After which Mr. Ellins suggests that they divide the loot into five equal piles, and that we draw numbers to see who get which. Rupert wasn't strong for this free and casual way of splittin' the gate receipts, but he gives in. And when we each has our heap in front of us, with the sand scraped into the middle of the cloth, Old Hickory has the glasses filled once more, and starts up that pirate song of his:

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest—
Yo-ho-ho! and a bottle of rum."

Right in the middle of the festivities, too, I takes my runnin' jump. Pickin' out a quaint old ring from my collection, I slips around beside Auntie and snuggles up confidential.

"Well, Torchy," says she, "what is it?"

"It's a big favor," says I. "See this? I want you to let me ask Vee to wear this for—for keeps. Can I?"

"You—you mean—" she begins.

"Uh-huh!" says I. "Until some time I can fit one on—well, one that the best man hands me. Come on, Auntie. Have a heart!"

"You ridiculous boy!" says she. "If you must, though—"

Say, I wasn't lookin' for that next move of hers. Think of it—Auntie! And she lands one right on my cheek, too. Everyone sees it. And, while I'm pinkin' up like a cranberry tart, Old Hickory sings out gleeful:

"Tut, tut, Cornelia! What is this all about?"

"I suppose," says Auntie, "that we must drink a toast to these youngsters of ours. That is, if Verona insists on being so foolish."

"How about it, Vee?" I whispers, capturin' her left hand. "Do we let 'em drink?"

"Silly!" says she. "The other finger."

It's a bit public, I admit. Might as well have hired a hall. But they all seems to enjoy handin' us the jolly. Mr. Ellins makes a reg'lar speech, tellin' how fond he is of both of us and how this event pleases him more'n findin' the buried treasure. He winds up by askin' if everybody ain't about ready to start back for New York. The vote is unanimous.

"Why not to-night?" asks J. Dudley.

"To-night it shall be," says Old Hickory.

"Say, Mr. Ellins," I breaks out just then, "lemme pass the word on that, will you?"

And, when I gets the nod, I breezes out on deck and up to the Captain's stateroom.

"Cap," says I, "welcome words from the boss."

"Sailing orders?" he asks.

"Yep!" says I. "You're to tie her loose from Florida as quick as you know how, and head her straight for the wet end of Broadway. Get me? Broadway! Say, but don't that listen good?"

CHAPTER XVII

A LITTLE SPEED ON THE HOME STRETCH

And, speakin' of thrills, what beats gettin' back to your own home town? Why, say, that mornin' when we unloads from the *Agnes* after a whole month of battin' around, New York looked to me like it had been touched up with gold leaf and ruby paint. Things seemed so fresh and crisp, and all so sort of natural and familiar. And the sounds and the smells! It's all good.

Course, there wasn't any pelicans floatin' around in the North River, nor any cocoanut palms wavin' over West Thirty-fourth Street. As our taxis bumped us along, we dodged between coffee-colored heaps of slush that had once been snow, and overhead all that waved in the breeze was dingy blankets hung out on the fire-escapes. Also we finds Broadway ripped up in new spots, with the sewer pipes exposed jaunty.

But somehow them things are what you expect. And you feel that, after all, there's only one reg'lar place on the map—here, where you

can either pay a nickel for a hot-dog breakfast off a pushcart, or blow in ninety cents for a pair of yesterday's eggs in a Fifth Avenue grill: where you can see lovely lady plutesses roll by in their heliotrope limousines, or watch little Rosie Chianti sail down the asphalt on one roller skate.

Uh-huh! It's a great place to get back to, take it from me. Specially when you hit it like I did, a two-way winner with a full-sized portion of pirate loot, and Vee wearin' a ring of mine.

And maybe I didn't enjoy driftin' into the Corrugated general offices, with everybody, from fair-haired Vincent up to Mr. Robert, givin' me the glad hail. Some different, eh, from the first time I struck there, 'way back in the early days? I was one of a bunch then, trailin' a want ad; and when Piddie had us lined up, it looked like I'd be only an "also ran" until Old Hickory pads past, discovered my pink thatch, and has me signed on as office boy.

Different! Why, inside of two minutes I begun to believe I was somebody. Vincent starts it when he swings the brass gate wide, just as I used to do for bank presidents.

"Good morning, sir," says he. "Glad to see you back, sir."

"Vincent," says I, "there's two of us, then; only I'm glad all over."

I hadn't counted on that row of lady typists, either. Honest, I never faced such a battery of friendly smiles in all my more or less cheerful career. Even Miss Muggs, who wears a business face that would have a head undertaker lookin' frivolous, loosens up her mouth corners for a second; while as for some of the other self-startin' queens—well, they had me rosy in the ears, all right. I hurries past to where Mr. Piddie is tryin' to make his ingrowin' dignity let loose its grip for a minute.

"Ah!" says he. "Back from the sunny South, eh? And how did you find Florida?"

"Easy," says I. "We looked it up on the map."

"No, no," says Piddie; "I mean, how was the weather down there?"

"No weather at all," says I. "They just have climate. How are things around the shop, though?"

"Very satisfactory," says Piddie, rubbin' his hands.

"Bound to be," says I, "with you and Mr. Robert sittin' on the lid."

With which soothin' josh and a pat on the shoulder, I slips through into the private

"THEN SHE GRIPS ME AROUND THE NECK AND SNUGGLES HER HEAD DOWN ON MY NECKTIE—SAY, THEN I KNEW."

office, where Mr. Robert sits puffin' a cigarette placid in front of a heaped-up desk. When he sees me, he grins.

"Well, well!" says he, shovin' out the cordial palm. "So the treasure seekers have returned, have they?" And he chuckles.

"Uh-huh!" says I, doin' a little grin on my own account.

"At least," he goes on, "you have a fine tropical complexion to show for your trip. Little else, I presume?"

"Brace yourself, Mr. Robert," says I, "for you got a jolt comin'."

"Why," says he, "you can't mean that—" I nods.

"Rupert had the right dope," says I. "It was just where he said it was—jewels and everything. Why, say, we got enough to stock a museum—sacks full."

"Oh, I say, Torchy!" says he, after starin' at me a second. "What's the sense?"

"I don't claim there's any sense to it," says I. "It was the simplest stunt you ever saw. We just went and dug, that's all. But there was the stuff. And we got away with it. You might's well get used to believin', though, for I'm applyin' right now for a block of Corrugated preferred. That's what I'm goin' to soak my share into."

"Your share?" says he. "But I didn't understand that you—"

"Vee and I helped locate the treasure mound," I explains, "and got counted in just in time. And say, the best is yet to come. It's goin' to be Vee and me for keeps pretty soon."

"Wha-a-at!" says he. "You've won over Auntie?"

"Right and reg'lar," says I. "Vee's wearin' the ring."

Say, Mr. Robert's got a grip on him when he gets real enthusiastic. I could feel it in my fingers for hours after. Then he had to call in Piddie and tell him, and by noon the word has been passed all through the offices. I expect it started modest, but by the time it got to that bunch of young hicks in the bond room they had it that I was going to marry a Newport heiress, resign from the Corrugated, and live abroad.

"In some swell Scotch castle, I suppose?" one of 'em asks.

"Unless I can rent Buckingham Palace," says I. "Say, it's a wonder you boys would let anybody feed you a chunk like that! Newport heiress be blowed! She's just a nice New York girl, one I've known four or five years; and when it comes to settlin' down we'll most likely look for three rooms on the top floor

with a two-by-four bath and a foldin' kitchenette. I'll be satisfied at that, though."

It's a great state of mind to be in. I hope I didn't look as foolish as I felt. If I had I guess they'd have had most of my private seccing gone over careful. But nobody seemed to suspect how giddy I was in the head. I goes caromin' around, swappin' smiles with perfect strangers and actin' like I thought life was just a continuous picnic, with no dishes to wash afterwards.

Course, my reg'lar evenin' program is to doll up after dinner and drop around. I'll admit Auntie hadn't issued any standin' invitation, but if Vee was expectin' me that's enough. And she was. We went to shows some, or took walks up the Drive, or just sat in the window nook and indulged in merry conversation. Once we had a whale of a time, when Mr. Robert gives a perfectly good dinner dance for us. Oh, the real thing—Cupid place cards, a floral centerpiece representin' twin hearts, and all that sort of stuff. I begun to feel as if it was all over but the shoutin'. Even got to scoutin' around at odd times, pricin' small apartments and gazin' into furniture store windows.

And then— Well, it was just a little chat Auntie has over the 'phone that takes most of

the joy out of life. I didn't notice what she was sayin' at first, bein' busy tryin' to draw out the floor plan of a cute four-room affair I'd inspected recent. All of a sudden, though, I pricks up my ears.

"But it's so hot in Jamaica," Auntie is tellin' this friend of hers—"that is, unless one goes to Montego Bay, and the hotel there—Oh, Newcastle? Yes, that is delightful, but—Can one, really? An army officer's villa! That would be ideal, up there in the mountains. And Jamaica always routs my rheumatism. For three months? When can we get a good steamer? The tenth. That would give us time. Well, I think we shall join you. Let me sleep on it. I'll call you about noon to-morrow? Good-by."

Meanwhile Vee and I are gazin' blank at each other. We don't need any diagram to understand what Auntie is up to. Just one of her old tricks—a speedy packin' up and a casual getaway for Jamaica. Say, wouldn't that crack your faith in human nature? And she proceeds to announce her scheme as placid as if it was something she'd thought out special for our benefit.

"Excuse me," says I, "but you ain't plannin' on Vee's goin' along, too, are you?"

"Why, certainly," says she. "Verona could

not stay here alone. And at this season the mountains of Jamaica are—"

"It's utterly stupid at Newcastle," breaks in Vee. "Nothing but a lot of black soldiers, and a few fat English officers, and seeing the same dozen people at teas three times a week."

"Besides," I puts in, "it would be a long jump for me to run down for over Sunday, wouldn't it?"

"How unreasonable of you both," says Auntie. "Now, you young people have been together a great deal of late. You can well afford to be separated for a few months."

I goes choky in the throat. There was a lot of points I wanted to make, but I couldn't seem to state 'em fast enough. All I can get out is: "But—but see here; we—we was sort of plannin' to—to be—"

"Nonsense!" cuts in Auntie. "You are hardly more than children, either of you. It's absurd enough of you becoming engaged. But beyond that— Oh, not for years and years."

Oh, yes, there was a lot more to the debate—on our side. I registered strong, with some cuttin' remark about bein' treated like a scrap of paper. As for Auntie, she simply stands pat. "Not for years and years." That's where her argument begins and ends. Not that she's messy about it, or intends to be mean.

She simply don't take our little plans serious. They don't count.

"There, there!" says she. "We'll say no more about it," and sails off to sort out the dresses she'll want to stow in her trunk.

"Huh!" says I, glancin' at Vee. "Merry idea of hers, eh? Years and years! Talks like she thought gettin' married was some game like issuin' long-term bonds maturin' about 1950."

"If you only knew how stupid and dull it's going to be for me there!" says Vee, poutin'.

"With you that far off," says I, "New York ain't goin' to seem so gay for a certain party."

"I suppose I must go, though," says Vee.

"I don't get it," says I.

"Oh, but I must," says she.

Durin' the next week we talked it over a lot; but, so far as I can remember, we only said about the same thing. It came out that this friend of Auntie's was one that Vee never could stand for, anyway: a giddy old dame who kalsomined her face, was free with advice on bringin' up nieces, and was a bridge and embroidery fiend.

"And I shall be left to sit around," says Vee, "bored stiff."

I knew it wasn't just a whim of hers; for one evenin', along towards the last, I found her with her eyelids red.

"Been cryin'?" I asks.

"A little," says Vee. "Silly thing to do when one's packing."

"See here, Vee," says I; "I ought to be doing something about this."

"But you can't," says she. "No one can. I must trot along with Auntie, just as I always have, and stay until—until she's ready to come back."

"Then it'll be a case of movin' on somewhere for the summer, I expect—Nova Scotia or Iceland?" says I.

Vee nods and lets out a sigh.

"If we was a pair of wild ducks, now," says I.

At which she snickers kind of hysterical and —well, it's the first time I ever knew her to do the sob act. Also I'd never been quite sure before that I was much more to her than sort of an amusin' pal. But when she grips me around the neck that way, and snuggles her head of straw-colored hair down on my necktie, and just naturally cuts loose for a good cry—say, then I knew.

I knew it was to be me and Vee from then on. I ain't givin' it any fancy name. We ain't either of us the mushy kind, I hope. But I felt that she needed me to stand by, that I could be of some use. That was thrillin' and wonder-

ful enough for me. And as I folded her in gentle and let her turn the sprinkler on a brand-new plaid silk scarf that I'd just put up a dollar for, I set my jaw firm and says to myself, "Torchy, here's where you quit the youths' department for good. Into the men's section for you, and see that you act the part."

"Vee," I whispers, "leave it to me. I didn't know just where I stood before. But I'm out of the trance now, and I'm set for action. Leave it to me."

"All right, Torchy," says she a bit choky, but tryin' to work up a smile. "You can do nothing, though."

Couldn't I? Maybe not. I was out to make a stab, anyway. There was a couple of days left before the steamer sailed, and I'd just passed a resolution that Vee was to stay behind. Beyond that my program was vague. After I'd walked a dozen blocks it begun to get clearer. My first stop was at the Ellins house; and when I'd succeeded in convincin' the new butler that it was no good tryin' to stall me off, I'm led into the lib'ry, where Old Hickory is sittin' in front of the big marble fireplace, half way through his second cigar. What I puts up to him is when I can realize on my share of the pirate loot.

"Why," says he, "the dealers haven't made

a report as yet, but if you wish an advance I should be happy to—''

''To-morrow?'' says I.

''Certainly,'' says he. ''Say five thousand—ten—''

''Make it five,'' says I. ''May I call up Mr. Robert from here?''

Mrs. Robert Ellins tells me this is his night at the club, so all I has to do is hop a Fifth Avenue stage, and in less'n twenty minutes he's broke away from his billiard game and is listenin' while I state the situation to him.

''Course,'' says I, ''it would bump Auntie some, but seems to me it's comin' to her.''

''Quite a reasonable conclusion,'' says he.

''It ain't as if she needed Vee,'' I goes on. ''She's just got in the habit of havin' her 'round. That might be all right, too, if she didn't have the travel bug so bad. But with her keepin' on the wing so constant— Well, I'm no bloomin' sea-gull. And when you're engaged, this long-distance stuff ought to be ruled out. It's got to be.''

''The way you suggest ought to accomplish that,'' says Mr. Robert.

''What sticks me is where to camp down afterwards,'' says I. ''I've been lookin' around some, but—''

''By Jove!'' says Mr. Robert, slappin' his

knee. "Who was it that was bothering me just after dinner? Waddy Crane! He's been pretending to be an artist, you know; but now he's got hold of his money, it's all off. He's going to start a bandbox theater in Chicago, elevate the drama, all that sort of thing. And that studio apartment of his up in the Fifties would be the very thing for you two. Wants to unload the lease and furnishings. Oh, Waddy has excellent taste in rugs and old mahogany. And it will be a rare bargain; I shall see to that. What do you say?"

Bein' in the plungin' mood, I said I'd take a chance.

"Good!" says Mr. Robert. "I'll have it all arranged before midnight. But when and where does the—er—affair come off?"

"I'm just plottin' that out," says I. "Could I sort of count on you and Mrs. Ellins for tomorrow evenin', say?"

"At your service," says Mr. Robert.

"Then I'll think up a place and see if I can pull it," says I.

If it hadn't been for that little detail of visitin' the license bureau I wouldn't have sprung it on Vee until the last minute. As it is, I has to toll her downtown with a bid to luncheon, and then I suggests visitin' City Hall. She's wise in a minute, too.

"It's no use, Torchy," says she. "I've promised Auntie that, whatever else I did, I would never run away to be married."

And there my grand little scheme is shot full of holes, all in a second. When I get headway on like I had then, though, I just don't know when I'm blocked. I swallows hard once or twice, and then shrugs my shoulders.

"Let's get the license, anyway," says I.

"What's the sense?" asks Vee.

"I can have it to read over, can't I?" says I. "That'll help some. Besides— Ah, come on, Vee! Be a sport. Didn't you say you'd leave it to me?"

"But I can't break my promise, Torchy," says she.

"That's right," says I, "and I wouldn't ask you to. Let's take the subway."

I won; and when I put her in a taxi an hour later she was still blushin' from answerin' questions. I had that paper with the city seal on it in my inside pocket, though. My next job is on the Reverend Percey, the one who did the job for Mr. Robert the time I stage-managed his impromptu knot-tyin'. Course, I couldn't sign him up for anything definite, but I got a schedule of his spare time from six o'clock on, and where he would be.

"But I—I don't quite understand," says he,

starin' puzzled through his glasses. "You say you are uncertain whether my services will be—"

"Now listen, Percey," says I. "I'm the most uncertain party at the present writing that you ever saw. But if I should 'phone, I want you to answer the call like a deputy chief goin' to a third alarm. Get that? And I'm payin' time and a half for every minute after dark. See?"

Maybe that wasn't just the way to hire a reverend, but I was too rushed to think up the proper frills. I had to attend to a lot of little things, among 'em bein' this plant with Auntie's cruisin' friend, the widow. She was in the habit, Mrs. Mumford was, of pickin' Auntie up now and then for an evenin' drive in her limousine; and what I was tryin' to suggest was that this would be a swell night for it.

"But I don't see how I can," says she, cooin' as usual. "Mrs. Hemmingway is to be a guest at a going-away dinner, and may not be home until late."

"Eh?" says I. "Why, that's fine—I mean, for Auntie. Ripping, eh, what? Much obliged."

The foxy old girl. She'd never mentioned it. And if I hadn't found out just as I— But I did. It simplifies things a lot. That is, it would unless— Here I grabs the 'phone again and calls up Vee.

"Auntie's going out to dinner to-night," says I.

"Yes, I know," says Vee. "She has just told me. I am not included."

"Then whisper," says I. "Revise that wardrobe trunk of yours like you expected a cold winter in Jamaica. Have a bag ready, too, and a traveling dress handy."

"But why, Torchy?" she insists.

"Leave it to me," says I. "We'll be up about 8:30."

"We?" she asks.

"Now be good," says I, "and you may be happy. Also get busy."

You see, I figured that what she didn't know she couldn't worry about, nor discuss with Auntie. Besides, it was all too hazy in my head for me to sketch it out very clear to anyone.

Honest, I don't see now how I kept from gettin' things bugged, for I sure was crashin' ahead reckless. I felt like I'd been monkeyin' with a flyin' machine until I'd got it started and had been caught somewhere in the riggin' with nobody at the wheel. But I was glad of it.

Mr. Robert helped out wonderful. When I stops packin' my suitcase long enough to remark, "But say, if it does work, where am I

headed for?" he's right there with the useful information.

"Here!" says he. "Your tickets and drawing-room reservation. It's a nice little place up in Vermont—quiet, refined, comfortable, all that sort of thing. Train at 10:45."

"Oh!" says I. "Then that's all right. Lemme see, where's that other sock?"

Say, I'd even forgot who all I'd asked to be on hand. That was what I was checkin' up when I rode past Auntie's floor on the elevator. I finds Vee some excited and more or less curious.

"Please," says she, "what is it all about?"

"It's a little game," says I, "entitled ditching Jamaica. There'll be some of our friends here directly to join in."

"Torchy," says Vee, starin' a bit scared, "you—you mean that— Anyway, I should change my frock, I suppose?"

"If you do," says I, "couldn't you make it that pink one, with the flimsy pink hat?"

"You goose!" says she. "If you like, though. Why, there is someone now!"

"That'll be Mr. and Mrs. Robert Ellins," says I. "You'll have to show speed."

Trust Vee. Just the same, I don't know where there's another girl that could dress for the big event in less'n half an hour, while the

guests was arrivin'. Next came Mr. Robert's sister, Marjorie, towin' her Ferdie along. Aunt Zenobia and my Uncle Kyrle and Aunt Martha breezed in soon after, with Old Hickory and Mrs. Ellins right behind 'em. Then Piddie, who'd put on his evenin' clothes over in Jersey at 5:30 and had been on the trolley most of the time since.

No, it wasn't a big mob, but it was a heap better than havin' some Connecticut parson call in wifie and the hired girl, as I'd first planned it.

And prompt at 9:30 the Reverend Percey shows up, some out of breath from his dash across from the subway, but ready to shoot his lines as soon as he got his hat off. While he didn't quite have to do that, we didn't waste much time on settin' the stage.

"Come on, Vee," says I, takin' her by the hand. "How about over there in our old window alcove, eh? Tum tum-te-tum!"

She holds back just a second. Then she tosses her chin up, smiles brave at me, and gives my fingers a squeeze. Say, she's some girl."

Another minute and the Reverend Percey is off with a flyin' start. He ain't so husky to look at, but he booms out the "Wilt-thou" stuff real impressive and solemn, part of the time

peekin' over his glasses at the folks behind, and then lookin' earnest at us. For an off-hand performance I call it a good job. And almost before I knew it was under way it's all over.

"Well, Vee," says I, plantin' a smack in the right place, "we've done it!"

"I—I wish Auntie knew," says she.

"But she does," says Mr. Robert. "At Torchy's request I have just called her up. She will be here in less than half an hour."

"With her blessin'—or what?" I asks.

"As to that," says Mr. Robert, "I am not informed."

Anyway, we had time to brace ourselves. Vee had only finished changin', and the bags was bein' sent down to the taxi when in she comes.

"Young man—" she begins.

But I heads her off.

"Why, Auntie!" says I, lettin' on to be surprised, and holdin' out both hands. "You don't know how we missed you. Honest! All my fault, though. But say, with your stickin' to that years-and-years idea, what else could we do—I ask you?"

And then I notices that them straight-cut mouth corners of hers ain't set near so hard as I thought. Her eyes ain't throwin' off sparks,

either. They're sort of dewy, in fact. And when she does speak again there's a break in her voice.

"Come," says she, beckonin' us up. "Perhaps you know best, after all, you silly children."

I'll bet we made a fine group, too, the three of us, Auntie in the middle, givin' us the fond clinch.

"But such impudence of you, to do it right here!" she goes on. "No one but you, Torchy, would have thought of that."

"Had to," says I, "with everything else barred. I suspected it might bump you some, but—"

"Pardon me," breaks in Mr. Robert, "but it's time for you to start for your train."

"Train!" says Vee. "Torchy, where are we going?"

"Just a sec.," says I, "till I look at the tickets."

So the last I heard from Auntie was a gasp

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